

Chapter 29

Jisel's expression changed to one of pure fear. Whatever was going on, she couldn't accept it. She wasn't ready for that. Her eyes went back to Cessilia, suddenly switching to anger.

"...He'll betray you too," she hissed. "You can't trust men. They will always find a younger, prettier woman to chase instead of you. Just you wait. He'll throw you away!"

"I'm not scared of Ashen changing his mind," Cessilia retorted calmly. "Even if he betrays me, I'll take it, and move on. You're the one who thinks we can't advance without a man in this world. But you're wrong. I've learned my lesson already. With or without a man by my side, I'll be fine."

"You... You wench!" shouted Jisel, still backing away, half-crying now. "You took it all from me!"

"You're the one who doesn't know how to let go. You didn't even love Ashen, yet you held on desperately. You could have stayed out of this conflict, but you chose to ally with the Yekara, Jisel. I thought you were a smart woman, but the truth is, you're the real coward here."

"Am I?" she scoffed.

Her eyes went down on the dagger Cessilia was holding. She was still hesitating, just a bit. She wasn't afraid to kill anymore, but Jisel... Somehow, she was reluctant to kill her. Not because of her relationship with Ashen, or because of their history. No, Cessilia had a feeling that, in other circumstances, with another path in life, that woman would have turned out very differently. In some way, Jisel was just another victim who had turned to the worst means to survive. They even had blood in common... She was a dragon's daughter too. Something in Cessilia's heart

held her hand, wondering if there was really nothing that could be done. Of course, Jisel had already gone too far to redeem herself, and she knew it was too late for that woman to change... or was it?

To her surprise, Jisel slowly stood up. She didn't have any weapons anymore, and no will to fight left. Cessilia didn't feel any danger coming from that woman... She had given up, yet a mocking smirk was on her lips.

“Are you really stronger than I am, Princess?” she said, strangely calmly. “...If your precious King betrays you, do you really think you can ever take it?”

“I can take it,” Cessilia retorted without blinking.

Jisel smiled, and stepped closer to her.

“There have been so many like me,” she muttered. “Desperate women, willing to do anything to survive. Women with no dragons to help them...”

She finally got very close to Cessilia, and touched her hand that was holding the dagger, strangely gentle. Cessilia held her weapon tighter, just in case Jisel would try to take it, or turn it against her, but it didn't feel that way.

“If you want to help them, you should be ready to do this.”

She suddenly pulled her fist, and brutally impaled herself on the dagger.

Shocked, Cessilia stared at Jisel's eyes, and the strange smile that appeared on her lips. The two women exchanged a stare for a long minute, and then, Jisel coughed some blood, and slowly fell back, her body dropping on the sand. Her eyes half-closed, she had stopped moving, lying completely still and her head turned toward the crying Red Dragon. Cessilia was shocked. She stared at Jisel's breathless figure, unable to comprehend why that woman had done that. She had been so desperate to survive just a moment ago... Had she realized she had lost the moment her dragon was trapped? Or had she already been badly injured during the fall? That would explain how her death had been so quick... or perhaps she had purposely stabbed herself so she'd die quickly... Cessilia would

maybe never understand why she had suddenly chosen this end, or get answers to her questions. Either way, that woman was dead.

Cessilia dropped her dagger, a bit out of breath. She felt... strange. The body of the dead woman lying in front of her didn't feel real. She didn't know what she should have expected, but strangely, she didn't really feel anything... Just tired, maybe. The waves gently came up to their position, reaching Jisel's body. If she left her like that, her body would be swept away soon. She would disappear in the sea, like many, perhaps. She could hear the long cries of the Red Dragon. Jinn's faint squeals were heartbreaking to hear... Cessilia let out a faint sigh, a cold mist coming out of her lips. One fight she had finally ended. It didn't feel like a victory, but it sure felt like closure.

A faint, more gentle growl came from behind her. Cessilia smiled, and turned to face Cece. The majestic Silver Dragon was standing there, with those big ruby eyes staring right at her. They faced each other on the beach, finally getting a moment to themselves. The thunder had stopped too. Now, all they could hear was the calm sea, the rain, and the cries of a mourning dragon. Cessilia slowly approached her dragon. Cece was so big now, she had to stand up to be at the same height as her dragon's eyes. Gently, she put her hands around her dragon's face, around what would be its cheeks. She smiled, and gently put her forehead against her cold scales.

Cece released a little breath of cold mist too. Strangely, her dragon's coolness warmed Cessilia's heart, and brought her peace.

"...Did you come back because you were worried about me?" she muttered.

Cece growled faintly.

"Thank you... for giving me a second chance."

She stayed for a long moment like this, taking deep breaths with her. The cold, almost eerie white mist around her dragon was making her feel safe, and calmed her down. She could feel her lungs fill with fresh air as some heavy burden was lifted off her shoulders. With Cece there, she felt

incredibly strong, serene and complete. Just like her dragon, she was different from the young woman Cece had parted with, years ago. The two of them were more mature, stronger, fiercer, and more united than ever. The two of them stood still for just a few minutes, as a quiet reunion.

After a while, Cessilia stepped back, her hands still on her dragon's cheeks.

"I think we have to go now. Sorry for bringing you back into such a mess."

Cece released a little spat out a mouthful of snow, and nudged Cessilia's face with her snout, making her smile.

"You're right. Let's go."

The two of them turned heads toward Jinn, who was still trying to fight the ice it was trapped in. Sadly for the Red Dragon, Cece's thick ice wasn't going to melt anytime soon. It tried to move again, but Cece suddenly growled as a warning, making Jinn whimper and calm down.

"...We'll take care of him later," said Cessilia. "Let's go help the others now."

Cece turned around, and Cessilia quickly climbed on her dragon's back. When they took off, Cessilia couldn't help but glance one last time at the beach, Jisel's body still lying there and getting smaller as Cece flew up. She sighed, and then turned her eyes forward.

Her dragon knew exactly where to head first. Flying through the rain, Cece took her back to the Capital's streets, flying above the main place of conflict. Just like Krai or Kian, Cece was too big for the narrow alleys of the island, so Cessilia jumped down, landing on a roof and sliding down until she hit the street. She had been dropped just streets away from the main battle, but the number of fires going on in the area was worrying her; the alleys were filled with dark smoke, ashes, and people fleeing. Some recognized her, and tried to run to her to beg for help, but Cessilia knew she had to keep going. Apologizing when she could, she kept running, trying to find her cousin's figure she had spotted from above.

"Tessa!"

“Cessi!”

As soon as she heard her, her cousin stopped her fight and turned around, and the two of them ran to each other. The two women jumped into each other’s arms, relieved.

“You’re good!” exclaimed Tessandra. “Damn, I was starting to get real worried... Is that Cece up there?!”

“It is,” smiled Cessilia. “She’s back.”

“She’s back and with a massive upgrade, you mean! What the heck did she eat to get that big? And... is it just me or has she changed color too?”

“Just a bit,” Cessilia chuckled.

“What about... up there?” muttered Tessandra, glancing toward the castle.

“...I got it. I just wanted to check on you guys here first.”

“If it wasn’t for those fucking fires, it would be better. We’ve pretty much won the fight already, but putting out those fires is a bit more complicated than just kicking some asses. Don’t worry, though, we got this. You go get your man, alright?”

“I will. But first...”

Cessilia glanced up at the sky, at her dragon, and Cece loudly screamed back. Then, the Silver Dragon did a beautiful arc in the sky, and dived down on the Capital. Right before it hit the building, it suddenly flapped its gigantic wings, and blew a long wave of ice and snow above the whole area. Everyone stopped, speechless, to witness the incredible white specks raining down on them. Not only had Cece blown an ice mist over the building, but the rain itself was cooled down, and came down in little snow crystals above the streets. Thanks to that, the fires were all almost immediately blown out and dampened, leaving smoke plumes everywhere. Tessandra’s jaw dropped.

“What in the world was that?! You got a snow dragon now?!”

“An ice dragon.”

“Ah,” scoffed Tessandra. “Too cool to play the water dragon now, uh? Well, I’m glad our girl is back... and you too.”

Cessilia smiled, and they hugged once more, quickly but strongly. Tessandra had noticed not only how her cousin wasn’t stuttering anymore, but also how she was different. When they let go of each other, she put a hand on her hip, glancing around.

“Well, thanks for the help with the fires, I think we’ll manage things from here. You better go and save whatever’s left of your man.”

“Will you be alright?”

“Cessi, I’ve been having fun slicing guys in two for the last hour or so, shouting after your annoying brother, and spending time with my boyfriend too. Trust me, we’re good here. Even Nana’s turning into somewhat of a pyromaniac...”

“Nana?” frowned Cessilia, confused.

“Long story, but the family might get bigger quite soon... Anyways, I’ll update you later. Don’t worry about us, go!”

Cessilia nodded and, after one last glance, she turned around, headed for the highest roof she could find in the area. It did seem like Tessandra and her brothers had a hold of the situation already. For some reason, it looked like they had gathered the Yekara soldiers and mercenaries in the middle of the plaza, and were subjugating the last ones resisting, or hunting them down in the streets.

Quickly reaching the rooftop, Cessilia jumped just in time to be grabbed by silver-scaled claws. Holding on to her dragon, she quickly climbed all the way to Cece’s back and sat to take a better look at the situation below. The streets were still very animated with people either fighting, fleeing, or helping to put out the remaining fires. It seemed like the last fights were now pretty scattered, and would die soon. As Cece flew higher, Cessilia saw beyond the Inner and Outer Walls. For some reason, one of the bridges was gone, but Kian and Krai were still fiercely defending two of the three remaining, and the last one was visibly under the citizens’

control. In fact, she could see people going in and out, probably exchanging supplies or carrying the injured to safer locations. She could bet the camp they had set up before was helping again, and she spotted what she thought to be food distribution lines too. Someone had perhaps reused their ideas for the greater good...

As they got closer to the castle, Cessilia saw the plaza where they had freed Sabael and the others. To her surprise, she spotted Kassian almost there, leading more men and regaining control of the area too. Her brother looked busy, but he still glanced up, and smiled at her when their eyes met. Cessilia smiled right back at him, a bit relieved to have him help out too. How much more complicated would the situation have been, had her big brothers not shown up...? Still, the final battle was up to Ashen and her.

Cece flew in circles around the castle. The tower Cessilia had fought Jinn in previously with the banquet hall was completely gone and reduced to a mountain of bricks. In fact, a fifth of the castle had collapsed and been destroyed as a result. Cessilia sighed, but luckily, it was most likely Yekara men who would have been killed in that disaster. Meanwhile, Cece kept flying, trying to find a point to drop Cessilia at. She didn't want to have to go back all the way from the bottom to the top, but her dragon quickly found the perfect spot. Ironically, it was the Cerulean Suite's balcony.

Cessilia jumped into the familiar place, now looking all dark and gloomy. She loved this room a lot, and was glad it had somehow survived the castle's collapse. She turned around to face Cece.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine."

Her dragon screeched in response, and left, probably off to extinguish more fires and help wherever it would be needed. Cessilia turned around, resolute, and began running. The castle had never felt so empty and cold. She only stopped to grab some new weapons, having lost her dragon claw swords in the fight against Jinn. She didn't expect any more dragon enemies, though, and a set of short swords taken from a Yekara soldier would be enough to face whoever was left. Now that her bond with Cece was re-established, Cessilia was even more unstoppable. She effortlessly

fended off the few soldiers that dared to stand in her way up the tower. The only thing she was worried about was Ashen. How long had passed since they had split up? She was desperate to know if he was alright. She had left him alone against his adopted brother and Lord Yebekh. If anything had happened to him...

As she kept climbing up, her worry grew exponentially for him. Jisel's words came back in her head. Would she really be fine without him? And what would happen to this Kingdom if anything happened to Ashen? The questions hammered her heart like a restless monster trying to bring her down. Still, Cessilia kept climbing. She couldn't even feel the injuries of her previous fight against Jinn anymore. Her Dragon Blood was healing it all, as if getting ready for the next one. Her body was still covered in scales, but that wouldn't be a problem if everything inside was healed just as well...

She finally reached the throne room and barged inside, opening the doors wide. She was shocked to find the room covered in blood. A real carnage had happened there. Cessilia suddenly remembered she and Ashen had also fought more soldiers before splitting up. Still, there was even more blood now, and fresher too. How could the two of them have... carried out such a bloody fight? There was even blood high up on the walls! Her green eyes moved, and she saw, right in time, the silver flash of a sword. Cessilia jumped without even needing to fight, blocking the blade right above Ashen.

Lord Yebekh's eyes grew wide in shock.

"...You!" he grunted.

"Me."

Cessilia kicked him in the torso, her incredible strength sending the man flying against the opposite wall. She heard him grunt in pain, but she was already leaning down to check on Ashen.

"Ashen! Are you alright?"

"Yeah... not doing exactly great..."

His slow, hoarse voice said more than his actual words about his current state. Cessilia's eyes went down on his body. He was alive, but badly injured. The large red stain on his abdomen was most worrisome. He was lying down, covered in blood and exhausted, but she had high hopes he could still survive if he was given the proper care soon... Cessilia glanced back. His adopted brother's body was lying not too far from his. Unlike Ashen, that man was dead, for good.

"...Please tell me we're not doing this again," grunted Ashen.

Cessilia shook her head.

"No... He's gone for good."

"I see..."

Ashen didn't seem glad about his win, just relieved it was over. He had fought well, and the fight had probably been more violent than what she could see. From the injuries on both men, Cessilia could tell they had fought like dragons despite each having their own disadvantage.

"You wench!"

Cessilia glared over her shoulder. Yebekh was getting back on his feet, furious. He had probably expected an easy win after leaving Ashen to fight his own brother. From the way he was completely unharmed, she could guess this rotten man had likely just watched the fight, waiting for a winner to emerge to strike.

"I'm fed up with that bastard..." groaned Ashen, glaring at him too.

"...Don't worry, stay still," gently muttered Cessilia.

He frowned, probably confused by her lack of stutter, but Cessilia smiled, and put a quick kiss on his lips.

"I got this," she reassured him.

Leaving Ashen there, she then slowly stood up to face Yebekh in his stead.

"Ah!" scoffed the man. "What kind of King lets a woman fight in his stead?!"

“What kind of rotten piece of shit leaves a disabled man to fight in his?” Cessilia retorted.

Yebekh’s expression dropped. That woman looked completely different from before. She sounded different, colder, angrier. He hadn’t expected this. No, he hadn’t expected her to come back at all! He had seen that tower collapse...

“It doesn’t change a thing,” he hissed. “This Kingdom is mine! I won’t be stopped by a mere girl!”

“...We’ll see about that.”

“I’ll admit I underestimated you, War God’s daughter,” said Yebekh. “I shouldn’t have expected that half-blooded bitch to be able to take care of you.”

Cessilia frowned slightly.

“What did you promise Jisel?”

“Oh, whatever that wench begged for. Either way, she knew this Kingdom would be mine. Once she knew our King was throwing her back onto the streets, she was only too happy to beg, like the whore she is!”

Cessilia’s fingers tightened on her weapon, Ashen’s sword she had taken from his side. She may not have liked Jisel, but she hated that man ten times more. He was one of those truly terrible people whose wickedness could literally be read on their face. He didn’t feel an ounce of remorse for what he had done, or all the lives his cupidity had sacrificed. He hadn’t even wasted a drop of sweat while dozens of his men were dying outside! Cessilia glanced back at Ashen. Even lying on the ground and injured, he still had the strength to glare at Yebekh. He probably couldn’t move, and it was better he didn’t. Not only because of his wound bleeding heavily, but also because he was under the effects of a poison, and moving around would only make it harder for his body to fight it. She had high hopes Ashen’s body would manage to fight it off somehow, as he had some tolerance to poison... From what she had seen, he was enduring well. Still, Cessilia wanted to get him out of here as fast as possible. The sooner he

received proper medical care, the greater his chances would be to survive this and fully heal.

“Are you worried for your King?” scoffed Yebekh. “That boy never had what it truly takes to be a ruler! He’s too young, too impetuous, too easily swayed by his emotions!”

“And you believe yourself to be any better?” Cessilia calmly retorted.

“Of course! See, it takes experience, strength, and some willpower to lead a nation. You’re a young lady, so you may not know, but while the population only bows to power, they have no idea of the real sacrifices that need to be made for a proper leader to truly rule!”

“You’ve sacrificed a lot of people, and yet you’ll never be King.”

Her words made the man glare back, but Cessilia was still perfectly calm. Despite the age difference and that man’s arrogant tone, it seemed as if she was the one lecturing him. The two of them were facing each other, a few steps away from one another, too far to begin fighting, but certainly getting ready for it. Cessilia wouldn’t move away from her position defending Ashen, but Yebekh had begun moving around, slowly pacing while spinning the tip of his sword against his finger, staring at her with a vicious expression.

“I have waited for far too long,” he retorted. “I’ve let boys play with swords and pathetic men wield power, waiting for my time to come!”

“You’re nothing but a cunning snake,” Cessilia muttered. “You’ve only used people to fulfill your means, but your underhanded ways will never make you a king.”

“Ha! And you think that brat is a better king, perhaps? He knows nothing!”

“He still makes a much better king than you,” she retorted without batting an eye. “Ashen is closer to the people than you’ll ever be. What kind of leader stays hidden in a tower while the rest of his men fight and bleed? What kind of man sacrifices his own niece for power? You don’t deserve to become King, Lord Yebekh. Your clan might follow your orders, but the rest of this Kingdom never will.”

“A child like you knows nothing! True power is leading your men to victory! The best leaders are the ones who do not need to fight the war themselves to win! The survivors are the smartest, not the strongest! All I need is to claim the heirs have died, and I am the most fitting King for this Kingdom! I have the men, the resources, and the money! I have an army that will follow me, and those we can’t get on our side, we will kill! The people of this Kingdom are powerless! They have no money and no power to resist the Yekara Clan! My ancestors knew long ago that this land would come back to us one day! My clan is one of the oldest here, Princess, and we have waited for centuries to get it back!”

“...Blind is the man who thinks reigning is all about owning a piece of land,” chuckled Cessilia. “Your leadership means absolutely nothing to the people of this Kingdom, Yebekh. They do not care for your schemes and underhanded ways. If anything, you’re probably the very last man they’d want to see on the throne.”

The man glared at the abandoned throne behind him. Ashen’s adopted brother’s body was still there, just steps away from the meaningful seat, and Yebekh’s eyes naturally went to it. He scoffed.

“Ha! You think either of those brats would have made a better king? They know nothing about politics! They couldn’t even get their way with their father! At least the General was a man who knew how to rule! He killed his enemies, and kept his allies where he could get rid of them if they weren’t useful! Compared to him, those brats are just powerless boys, only capable of sitting there and listening to what we tell them!”

He suddenly pointed at Ashen, and Cessilia raised her sword in a defensive stance.

“Why do you think I didn’t get rid of this boy sooner? I had plenty of opportunities! But while he was alive, he made a perfect puppet for us to use! Each Lord is more pathetic than the next, worthless, useless, and I knew he would follow what I told him, helpless as he was! ...Everything should have gone just fine. All I needed was to give him my daughter as a wife, and I would have controlled his heirs as I wanted! There is no need for a throne or a crown, I have always been the real King of this Kingdom!

Unlike the Tyrant, I didn't need people to know my name. All I needed was the power that came with those responsibilities! I would have kept this Kingdom powerful, and safe from your damn Dragon Empire!"

"What of the cities outside the Capital?" asked Cessilia. "All those people dying of hunger? All the homeless, penniless people who can't live in the Capital?"

"There is no need to bother with the vermin," scoffed Yebekh. "It takes care of itself eventually. It will probably take decades before those wretched people figure it out, anyway. All we need in the Capital is for the money to flourish, our clan to prosper!"

"...So you're really just in it for the money and power," sighed Cessilia. "I was right. Even in a million years, you'll never be worthy of the King's position."

"You're just a pampered child coming from an all-powerful family!" he shouted. "You know nothing of real power! Only the Yekara Clan has what it takes to stand up to the Dragon Empire! You think things are so easy because your family has dragons to keep your people in check! Here, all we have are weapons and money!"

"...You seem to forget one thing, Yebekh," Cessilia retorted, finally stepping forward. "The Dragon Empire's leader is a woman, and she has no dragon either. The only adult dragon in the Capital is my grandfather's, and he is too old to bother. Moreover, our people do not fear our dragons anymore. My siblings and I have been playing in the streets with our dragons along with any commoner child. If anything, our people adore our dragons because they defend them. They don't fear them. You think only fear can allow one to rule? You're wrong. ...No, you're an idiot. You're the one who has no idea what makes this Kingdom's people feel safe or happy."

"How dare you?!" he shouted, furious. "This isn't your Kingdom! You know nothing!"

"I've seen and heard enough," Cessilia retorted.

The man took a step back, taken by surprise. This didn't even feel like he was facing the same woman from earlier. Her appearance had changed a lot. He could understand the ripped clothes, the dried blood, and the silver scales on her, but... what was making him retreat was her demeanor. She didn't act like the shy princess from before. He had thought this woman would be easy to handle compared to the King, so how was she now facing him, acting tall, mighty, and as powerful as a queen?!

Cessilia had always been tall, but only now did she seem to look her full height, almost looking down on that pathetic man, and standing like a lioness between him and the King. No, she looked like a fierce dragon facing him, ready to spit her fire at a weak human. She was still clearly a human, so how were her green eyes so... scary? He took a deep breath and held his sword with two hands, getting ready for her to attack any second now. He could tell she was strong, and not as tired as he would have hoped for her to be. He had been able to stand on the sidelines while the King fought his adopted brother, but now, she was not going to let him get away so easily. She wasn't just blocking him from approaching the King, she was also standing in front of the large doors, making any attempt to flee impossible. He thought he'd be the one to lead the fight, so how was he feeling cornered already?!

“Real leaders are military, strategic leaders,” he resumed, with a low voice. “Those young men are nothing but empty symbols for the people.”

“Ashen resonates with his people more than you'll ever be able to understand.”

“He's only a prince for show! That brat knows nothing!”

“He knows what his people's lives are like!” Cessilia suddenly shouted back.

She stepped forward again, making the man even more nervous.

“He's a man of the people, and you're just a rat making a feast out of scraps,” she continued with an ice-cold glare. “You think you manipulate anything? You're just finding yourself excuses to remain the vulture hiding in the shadows. Ashen is the real King, and he will be for as long

as he's alive. Even if something happened to him, those people would never accept you as their leader. ...Look outside, Yebekh. You've already lost. The people aren't the cowards you think. They'll fight with all their might for their freedom, and since you have no idea what those people truly want, you and your men will inevitably lose!"

Cessilia's sword was on him in a split second. Yebekh had to show his skills quickly to be able to block it at the very last second, and endure the tremendous strength of the Dragon Princess. He grimaced, holding his sword against hers. Their faces were so close she could see the pearls of sweat appearing on his forehead, and his teeth gritting from the effort. Cessilia was fed up with this man, and had no intention to give him any chance. She was sick of his underhanded ways, and ready to end him here and now. She suddenly released the pressure and spun around, launching a second assault with impressive speed.

In just a few clashes of swords, she was able to confirm Yebekh's skills and experience weren't fake or overestimated. He truly had the right movements and reflexes of a man who had fought in a military camp most of his life. Her terrific strength was met with his best tactics to try and block her, again and again, as she intensified her attacks. Cessilia had to admit, the old snake was a decent fighter. In her father's army, he would have been amongst the best-ranked generals, capable of military strategy as well as fighting himself.

When they finally parted, her giving him a break, the man was out of breath but unscathed. Cessilia slowly spun her weapon in her hand, and retreated to get to Ashen, quickly checking on him. He had closed his eyes, but he was still slowly and steadily breathing. She slowly moved her wrists to stretch them a bit. His sword was larger than what she's used to and not the type she would have chosen, but she had to make do with it.

"If only you hadn't interfered..." hissed Yebekh. "I had this stupid boy in the palm of my hand!"

"I've already heard that today," groaned Cessilia, "and I pity you for not being able to realize how much of a good king you already had. If I hadn't

interfered, you would have fallen all the same. It's your loss for underestimating how strong this Kingdom really is."

"Strong? You're the mistaken one, child! Those people are living with nothing! This Kingdom is destined for ruin if no strong man takes the reins!"

To his surprise and anger, Cessilia chuckled.

"...Do you know what those people really need, Yebekh?"

"Money!" he shouted. "Power, and the means to—"

"Fish beignets."

Cessilia's words surprised him so much, the man's expression fell, and he blinked twice, wondering if he hadn't dreamed this stupidly simple couple of words. He scoffed.

"W-what did you say?"

"Fish beignets," Cessilia retorted, with a smile on her lips.

"Have you gone mad?!"

"I'm very serious," she said. "You've probably never had any, but what all those people outside need are tasty, warm fish beignets. The taste of delicious food in the morning, warming up their hearts and filling their stomachs. You see, men like you are the type to consider the Dorosef people as ignorant and harmless. When, in reality, they are exactly what the Kingdom needs. Nothing but kindness, and the will to make other people's lives better. They do not care who eats the beignets they prepare every morning. They are just happy to serve."

"You're ridiculous," grunted Yebekh. "There's no way stupid beignets—"

"It's not just stupid beignets. It's the best food I've ever tasted," chuckled Cessilia. "The fish is fresh, the dough is warm, and it just melts on your tongue and fills up your stomach. ...In fact, it's probably worth much more than they make people pay for it too, but the Dorosef don't care for money. All they want is to have others taste their food, and they always serve it with a smile. The Dorosef people are nothing like men like you, but they

are the real owners of this Kingdom. They live every day with little to no expectations, only happy to fish, cook, and eat.”

As she said this, Cessilia had naturally walked up to one of the windows, glancing outside. Ironically, from this tower, she could see the seashore and the harbor where the Dorosef ships were swaying on the sea. Despite the rain, it seemed much calmer and more peaceful than the burning city she had seen outside.

“This Kingdom’s people have no need for a man like you, absolutely none, Yebekh. This Kingdom won’t heal with more military power or political schemes. It will heal if we, the people, get along and help one another, if they understand each other, and open their doors, and their hearts. You think your Yekara Clan is better than the others, but you’re the very last clan this population cares about, believe me. The warm herbal tea the Hashat makes is worth thousands of your swords. They will heal the Kingdom when it’s needed, and study until its medical knowledge is on par with the Dragon Empire’s. The Sehsan Tribe’s beautiful creations will bring back color and hope in their lives. They can trade with the Empire, and bring even more wealth, even more beauty back to the Eastern Kingdom. They don’t think about reinforcing borders, they think about what could be gained by opening them. Even the Cheshi are ready to ally with the people, stepping out of centuries-old secret hiding places to protect others!”

“Enough!” Yebekh shouted. “Those useless tribes’ trinkets and stupid tea are meaningless! This Kingdom needs to get stronger!”

“You can’t become stronger if you don’t heal first,” Cessilia retorted. “If I have learned one lesson since coming here, it is that. A kingdom needs time, patience, kindness, and faith to heal, just like people. Those people aren’t just cattle who’ll all depend on you. Each and every person out there is already doing their best and not waiting for their King to save them. They don’t need a strong king, they need one that can understand them, get on their level, and give them time. Your greedy and brutal ways will only provoke more struggle and death. Look outside! You’ve already

filled this Capital with blood and fire for power! What will happen to the whole Kingdom if a man like you ever holds more power?"

She took a deep breath, and returned to her original position, glaring at him.

"I won't allow it," she said. "I'll put an end to your ambitions, and help Ashen get it back on its feet."

"You can't stop us," he groaned. "Even if you kill me, another commander is ready to take over any minute! The Yekara Clan is stronger than you think!"

"Good," said Cessilia. "I don't care how long it'll take, but we'll make sure to end this. My brothers would call it boring if you made it too easy for us. Plus, I plan to stay here for a while."

"What gives you the right to interfere?!" he shouted, raising his sword and getting ready to defend himself again. "You're just a child who came here on a whim!"

Cessilia chuckled, and raised her sword.

"Didn't you hear your King before, Lord Yebekh? I'm his Queen. I didn't come here on a whim, I came here to heal. Now I'm ready to give back what this country gave me. ...Moreover, when the King needs her, it's the Queen's duty to step up and get rid of the vermin. Get in position, Yebekh. This girl is about to show you what a real fighter can do."

The loud growl of a furious Silver Dragon echoed with her words.

"You're—!"

Lord Yebekh never found anything to insult her with, and Cessilia didn't leave him the time to, either. She decided to resume this fight, more determined than ever. Her sword swung in his direction, and he only had enough time to raise his. Their swords clashed again, faster than before. They clearly had opposing objectives: Cessilia wanted to end this fight soon, while Yebekh wanted to make it last. It probably had to do with Ashen's condition. That man thought that if he could make this last long

enough, the King would die. Cessilia had no intention to let him win. She was getting tired, and this was the last fight she couldn't wait to be done with.

She was already very different from the woman she was when she first arrived. Even since that morning, she felt like she had shed her old skin and been reborn into a stronger being, fiercer than ever. This time, she could proudly stand as the War God's daughter and Ashen's future Queen. She was pushing Yebekh more and more, not withholding her attacks, relentlessly pursuing the man. As he was trying to get away from her and her weapon, the man kept her circling around the room. The only thing Cessilia was adamant about was not letting this man anywhere near Ashen. She was protecting him, standing in the way as much as she could while trying to finish Yebekh off. It wasn't as easy as she had hoped. The man was truly skilled and experienced. Unlike most men, he knew not to rely on his strength alone, and was improving minute by minute, learning Cessilia's style as much as she was learning his. It was no easy fight.

“My lord!”

The voices coming from behind her made Cessilia lose her focus. She glanced back, annoyed to see more Yekara soldiers had made it all the way up to this room. She could already barely hold Yebekh at a distance!

“Ah!” shouted Yebekh. “See, a brat like you is no leader! You can't do anything if you're alone...”

Cessilia's green eyes suddenly went back to him, glowing with anger.

“Who said I was alone?”

A furious dragon growl resonated above their heads. It was louder than the thunder, like a deafening echo in the skies above, surrounding the tower. Glimpses of flying silver scales flew by the windows like lightning bolts in the darkness. A smile appeared on Cessilia's lips. The Yekara men were already staring toward the ceiling, looking afraid and unsure of what to expect. They probably hadn't seen the giant Silver Dragon yet, and now they were in the front row seats. Shortly after, the whole tower began to shake. A lot. Groaning and grimacing, Ashen forced himself to sit up, and

using his arm, slowly retreated until he was leaning his upper body against Cessilia's leg.

"...A friend?" he asked, looking up with a worried expression.

"I think she missed you more than I thought," chuckled Cessilia.

Another dragon growl resonated, higher-pitched. After more shaking, the tower stopped moving. It was only a second before the roof was suddenly torn off. It happened so violently and quickly, it looked as if it had simply been popped up, the whole ceiling disappearing in one go. The roof was literally sent flying god knows where, while stones from the top of the torn walls were falling down the sides, in or out of the room. The tower itself trembled again, and a gigantic dragon's face appeared above them. Ashen gasped.

"That can't be... Cece!" he exclaimed, a baffled expression stuck on his face.

The Silver Dragon answered with a gentle growl, before turning its large ruby eyes toward the Yekara soldiers that had just appeared. Raising their spears and swords, the men were suddenly not so sure about attacking anymore. Cece let out that strange scream, and most of them took a step back, unsure.

"Good girl," chuckled Ashen, clearly the only man happy to see the dragon.

Luckily, the tower they were in was much bigger than the one Jinn had destroyed, and a bit sturdier. As Cece suddenly put a gigantic paw on the ground, the floor squeaked dangerously, but it held well under the pressure. The dragon's head was right above the half-torn wall, and Cessilia guessed her dragon was probably supporting itself against the whole tower. Cece was way too big to get inside, but the dragon would still make a trustworthy support against more enemies... Meanwhile, Ashen was still visibly in awe. He leaned against the silver-scaled paw.

"Damn, you're so big now... I missed you too, pretty girl."

Cece must have enjoyed the compliment, because he received a gentle growl and slight nudge in response.

“Ashen, you shouldn’t move too much...”

Just as she said that, Cessilia watched him fight against his own body to get back up, although he immediately leaned against Cece’s head, patting the dragon’s snout. A happy Cece let out a gentle, soft growl.

“No way,” he grimaced. “I’m done napping, I just needed a minute to catch up... I can’t just stay still when we’ve got company, can I?”

One of the Yekara soldiers, braver than the others, suddenly decided to attack despite the dragon. With a yell, he ran forward with his sword.

Ashen only raised his leg with the right timing for the man to brutally run chest-first into his foot, losing his breath, and stumble back. The King moved immediately to grab his spear from him, swinging the weapon around. He made a circular motion with it, stabbing the soldier’s shoulder, and threw him right into Cece’s mouth. The dragon who had opened its mouth in a timely manner immediately closed it, chewing with a satisfied expression.

“See?” smiled Ashen, his eyes on the men. “I’ll handle it just fine.”

Cessilia was still worried, not about his skill, but by the fact that he needed to lean against her dragon to be capable of standing. She knew Cece had also probably come back because of her own worry for Ashen. Her dragon was naturally responding to her true feelings... However, Cessilia had resolved to not doubt him anymore, and she knew that Cece wouldn’t allow anyone to injure him either. Right now, those soldiers were her lesser concern. She had to finish this fight, and for that, she had to get rid of the main enemy, Lord Yebekh.

The hateful man was still standing on the opposite side of the tower, his shocked eyes still on the dragon. Then, he shifted to Ashen, a grin appearing on his lips.

“This foolish man is only hurrying his demise. He might be acting like a tough fighter, but the poison will kill him anyway...”

“I won’t let that happen,” retorted Cessilia.

She didn’t have a single minute more to lose with empty talking and threats. She ran toward Yebekh, swinging her sword with more resolve than ever. She knew she could finish this fight, she just had to find the right timing.

Strangely, Cessilia was having flashbacks of her training days while wielding her sword against Lord Yebekh. Her full attention was on this fight, but while facing one of the few people in this world who is actually on the same level as one of the War God’s children, she couldn’t help but remember her days in the North Army Camp. Their father had never let them rely on their strength alone. She had already fought against men bigger than she was, twice more experienced, or with the most dangerous weapon. Every time, her own strength hadn’t been enough to simply win. There was no battle won with only speed, strength, or technique. Cessilia knew she should never underestimate anyone, and she wasn’t letting Yebekh’s vicious attacks get to her. She was standing her ground, offering him a real duel, not withholding her attacks, and not showing any gaps in her defense either. Her movements were precise, perfect. It was as if she was literally dancing around the room, trying to get the upper hand of this fight. It wasn’t just about wielding a sword bigger than herself; Cessilia was using her whole body in each attack, all of her strength and focus.

Yebekh was sweating and getting frustrated. Although he did think that woman could potentially give him a challenge, he was a man drunk on over thirty years of experience. Unlike Cessilia, he wasn’t humble enough to realize a girl twice younger could possibly push him past his limits. Cessilia was his daughter’s age, but making him sweat and tremble like he was back in his training days. No, in fact, he was slowly realizing how terrifying this woman was. No woman this young should have this much potential. She wasn’t fighting like a young maiden with a bit of good training, she was fighting like an experienced swordmaster, and making him feel like a student!

The sword fight between the two was turning into one of the best duels that could ever be witnessed. They were both incredibly fast, violent, and

relentless. Even the Yekara soldiers and Ashen couldn't help but glance to the side several times, as if mesmerized by the superb choreography going on across the room. It was almost as if the two of them had rehearsed this beforehand, offering a ballet of blood and death. Each attack was potentially deadly, and only avoided by a hair, or blocked with equally impressive strength. Their movements were even hard for the naked eye to keep up with, as they only froze for seconds when their swords clashed, pressed against each other, and neither won, so they parted with a promise to try and kill each other again. They barely caught any breaks, and waited until they were steps away from each other, as if the short breaks had to be mutually agreed on.

Only the most experienced soldiers could tell Cessilia was starting to get the upper hand in this battle. The Princess was tired too, her body covered in sweat and blood, but she wasn't willing to stop at all. She was also doing an impressive job of keeping Yebekh cornered where she wanted him to be, as if she was making the rules and choosing the physical limits of their fight. No one would have dared to intrude, anyway. The soldiers were almost happy to face the King and the dragon rather than this woman that seemed possessed by death itself. She was like a goddess of war, as beautiful as she was scary, and unpacifiable. Foolish was the one who ever dared to take a single step in her path. Yebekh himself was barely surviving. The man was sweating twice as much as Cessilia, visibly out of breath, his limbs beginning to shake from the overexertion.

The fight had insidiously shifted into more of a mental battle between the two. Physically, they were probably capable of remaining on an equal level, but psychologically, Cessilia was starting to make the man lose his ground. It was down to which one of them would admit defeat first, and Yebekh was slowly pushing past his own limits. He refused to admit how scary that woman was, while his whole body was about to beg for mercy. It was one leap he refused to take. He refused to be scared of her, but Cessilia was starting to grow into this furious, scary creature standing before him. The dragon that manifested in her furious movements, glowing green eyes, and powerful attacks was growing scarier every second. It was as if the more they fought, the more he discovered the

dangerous beast behind the gentlewoman. The more he pushed her, the more powerful she became, and soon, she'd devour him whole. He couldn't understand. When? When did this foolish, weak, and stuttering woman grow into this fearsome monster? How could he lose? He, who had fought so long and so hard to get here? He had trained, relentlessly, day and night for years, only to be bested by a child? He just couldn't understand. No, he refused to admit he had already lost.

Stumbling back, exhausted, scared, defeated, the man began to lose his grip on his weapon. His brain was screaming he had to run, to flee this place, far from those green eyes. He stumbled again and fell down, his eyes opened wide in horror. Cessilia knew she had won already. She slowly lowered her sword, pointing it toward his chest, and walked toward him. The man retreated, desperate, and suddenly, his hand touched something liquid and warm. Blood. He finally looked around, realizing he was in the middle of his own men's bodies. They were all dead, or dying with a limb or two torn off. The man gasped, as if he was horrified for the very first time by all the deaths he had caused.

His terrified eyes went back to Cessilia. He could almost see it. Behind that girl, the shadow of a warrior, that dark aura that belonged to the real monster, the War God who had forged his daughter into a being as terrifying as himself. Yebekh could see it now. That child wasn't enhanced by her dragon blood, but by the teachings of the best fighter of all. The one who had earned his title of War God. Who was he, a mere mortal, to think he could ever stand a chance against that...?

"P-p-please," he begged, completely out of it. "I-I'm sorry. I'll stop. I'll stop. I-I'm sorry. ...I-I beg you..."

To his surprise, Cessilia actually stopped walking. Her green eyes weren't betraying anything, and for a fateful second, he really thought he could beg for his life to be spared. That was it. She was still a woman, a young child who could be begged, convinced, swayed. She had to have some pity for the weak, some mercy. If he could convince her to let him go, then he'd be able to survive this, and then—

A large hand suddenly covered his vision. He felt himself being brutally pulled backwards, and his back violently hit the cold metal of armor.

“You don’t deserve to be spared, you bastard,” whispered a voice next to his ear. “You’ve got to pay for all the lives you sacrificed.”

Ashen put the blade against his neck, and mercilessly sliced his throat. Yebekh only made one throaty sound, and fell forward, his face in his men’s blood, his eyes still wide open. He was dead.

Cessilia let out a long sigh.

“...It’s over,” she muttered.

Ashen nodded, but right after, he grimaced and fell backwards. Cece moved immediately, and he landed gently against the dragon’s snout with a grunt.

“Damn it.”

Cessilia ran to his side, checking on him.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m feeling great,” he lied. “I would have taken him, but... I figured you should have the fun. Oh, fucking poison...”

“It’s alright. Just lie down... No, actually, let’s get on Cece and take you to the Hashat Family, they’ll have what you need. You did well,” she added with a gentle kiss against his cheek.

“Thanks... We’ll just pretend that’s true when your cousin’s around, please? I don’t mind my Queen saving the day, but I know she’s going to give me hell for just lying there and my ego can only take so much bruising at once...”

“Ashen, stop talking. Just get on.”

The truth was, Cessilia knew he was already in a bad condition when they had gotten here. It was impressive he had managed so well and won against dozens of men when most wouldn’t even have been able to get up... Even with the dose of poison he had received, she thought he was

still surprisingly fine. He could barely stand, and his complexion wasn't too good, but she had really feared for his life all along.

Even now, he was still standing and gently pushed her hand away when she was trying to have him get on the Silver Dragon.

"No," he said. "We have to stop the fights first."

"We can have Cece do it after. For now—"

"No, we have to stop the Yekara from fighting. Now," he insisted.

To Cessilia's surprise, he walked away from her, and stumbled all the way to Yebekh's body, grabbing the dead man by his hair. His eyes stopped for a moment to glance at his adopted brother. For a very brief moment, Cessilia thought she saw a melancholic expression in his eyes, but when he turned around, it was already gone. He walked back up to her, pulling Yebekh's body.

"...What are you going to do?" she asked, confused.

"I have a formula that works... Let's get to the plaza."

Cessilia helped him get on Cece. The Silver Dragon tried to take a bite of Yebekh's body, without success, and took off with an annoyed growl. As they rose higher in the sky, they both got a better view of the half-destroyed castle. It was truly a mess down there, with two towers wrecked, and possibly much more damage than they could see.

"...I'm sorry," she muttered.

"Don't worry. I never really liked this place anyway... and we can always build a better one. One you'll enjoy living in."

Cessilia smiled and nodded. It would have almost been a romantic moment if they didn't have a third and dead passenger with them...

Cece effortlessly took them to the plaza where the fight was still going on, although clearly ending. Just like they had already predicted, the Yekara were unwilling to stop fighting despite their defeat growing more and more obvious. That's when Ashen pushed Yebekh's body off Cece's back.

It took a couple of seconds to violently hit the ground below, provoking a surprise amongst the fighters. Everybody stopped, as the body had been dropped right in the middle of the plaza. The closest people immediately recognized his face, and soon, the word spread that Lord Yebekh was dead.

“Yekara!” shouted Ashen. “Your leader is dead! If you don’t drop your weapons now, you will all suffer the same fate!”

It took a few seconds, and many of the Yekara fighters gathered to see the body for themselves. Some exchanged words between themselves but as soon as one of them dropped their weapons, many others did the same. Soon enough, they saw many pairs of hands in the air, the Yekara troops capitulating.

Cessilia found her cousin on the other side, who was grimacing, shaking her sword.

“Damn it, Cessi, you party-pooper!”