

Chapter 3

For an old man like Yassim, being able to sleep on a thick, comfortable mattress was a luxury. He certainly hadn't expected to be so well received in the Onyx Castle, the War God's residence. That servant woman named Nebora had shown him the bedroom he was to stay in after dinner, and he had been shocked to see such a nice room prepared for him, in such a short time, with even a fireplace bringing its dancing glow. Hence, it was no wonder he had fallen asleep right there, completely surrendering to his own exhaustion.

He was woken up early by gentle knocks on the door, and it took him a few seconds to remember where he was, and what he was doing there... The fire had long been extinguished, and the room was cold and dark.

"Good morning," said Nebora with a soft voice. "Did you sleep well? The girls are almost ready to leave, we wanted to let you sleep for as long as possible, but I fear time is up. You can still join Tessa for breakfast, though."

"Ah, yes, thank you, Lady Nebora..."

The servant woman nodded and went to open the windows, but for some reason, Yassim found she was a bit cold toward him. He quickly grabbed his coat to put it back on with a shiver and washed his face with the little basin of warm water she had brought, brushing his beard quickly and trying to arrange the few white hairs scattered on his scalp.

"Your King..."

He was surprised to hear her address him all of a sudden. The woman approached him with a severe expression.

“He’d better be a good man,” she said. “I’ve watched those girls grow up, I helped their mothers raise them. I love them like my own. I may only be a servant, but trust me, your King should fear me as much as those dragons if anything happens to either one of them.”

“I-I understand, my lady,” muttered Yassim.

After she was done talking, Nebora put back on a polite smile with an impressive calm, and walked out of the room, leaving him stunned. The women of the Dragon Empire were clearly as fiery as the dragons!

Yassim let out a short sigh but quickly prepared himself, as he was worried about making the young ladies wait for him. He only had his coat and shoes to put back on, but as he did, he felt a bit nervous. Since they were flying back to his Eastern Kingdom, he couldn’t help but wonder if he would make it to the end of the day. A lot of things were bound to happen, and he could only pray for a better outcome...

Preventing himself from thinking too much, he walked out of the bedroom, noticing how dark the castle was despite the sky being lit by the moonlight. He hadn’t really paid much attention before, but the walls were as dark as the castle’s name... Could they really be onyx though? He didn’t even dare touch it to test his theory. Resolute, Yassim found his way back downstairs, noticing his muscles weren’t so sore anymore. Truly, a good night’s sleep was the best remedy at his age...

“Morning!” exclaimed Tessa when he stepped into the large salon from the previous night.

Just like Nebora had said, the young woman was having her breakfast, a large selection of dried and fresh fruits, nuts, and cereals displayed before her. Quickly greeting her, Yassim walked to pour himself some tea. He was too nervous to be hungry, and could only sit on the edge of a stool, watching her eat ferociously.

“Everything is packed and ready,” she said, her mouth half full. “We’ll get going soon!”

“That’s great... What about Lady Cessilia?”

“She’s already outside. She’s talking with her dad.”

“I see.”

Yassim didn’t dare ask any more, so he quietly drank his tea, letting Tessa enjoy her breakfast in silence. He was a bit nervous, but already grateful they had let him sleep. Judging how her outfit was completely different, a thicker one with a long black coat, the girls had been up for a while already.

He waited until Tessa was done eating to stand up with her and, without a word, they both walked to the castle’s entrance. In the sky, the first purple waves were announcing the sunrise already. The Black Dragon was standing in the middle of the castle’s courtyard, several bags fastened on his back, eating a large chunk of raw meat. This time, a couple of saddles had been put on his back, and Yassim realized this was probably meant for him. However, his eyes didn’t stay on the dragon long; farther away, two silhouettes were cut by the first rays of sunlight.

The War God was talking to his daughter, the two of them facing each other closely. Yassim couldn’t hear what was said, but he could see the big, green eyes of Cessilia on her father, full of tenderness. As if he couldn’t bear to part with his daughter yet, the War God had his large hand on her cheek, also staring at her with a serious expression. Yassim felt a little pinch in his heart seeing this. He had never had the blessing to conceive any children himself, but this scene brought this old man a lot of emotions, just by witnessing it from afar...

He only had a little satchel for himself, but Tessa brought another bag to put on the dragon’s back while he stood there, a bit unsure of what to do next. The large creature truly didn’t seem to mind carrying all of that. Its long tail merely wagged a bit as the young woman climbed on its back to secure everything once more.

“Did you take your thicker coats?” asked Nebora, coming out of the castle behind him. “It’s going to be colder up there!”

“Yes!” shouted Tessa, patting one of the bags.

“This one is for you,” the servant woman suddenly said to him.

To Yassim’s surprise, he had to open his arms at the last second to receive a thick, heavy fur cape. This was one of the most magnificent pieces of clothing he had ever received! This was definitely made of a bear’s fur and held with some leather straps, yet they casually gave this to him?

“I-I can’t accept such a valuable gift...” he muttered, feeling the weight of that gift in his hands.

“Just take it,” said Nebora. “It’s merely a little coat. With everything the boys hunt, we have dozens like this, so don’t worry about it.”

Once again, he was astonished by the difference in wealth and strength. The War God’s sons could hunt large beasts like these and gift away fur coats as if it was nothing? It was too impressive! In the Eastern Kingdom, the wars and fires had chased a lot of their fauna away from their former habitats, making such hunting prizes extremely rare and valuable... Still, he accepted the gift, bowing a couple of times, and put it on his back. This was indeed very warm, and heavy on his old bones!

A few steps away, Cessilia hugged her father one last time, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. Then, they slowly parted, the War God’s hand falling.

“Mother will be b-back soon,” she promised in a whisper.

“...I know.”

She gifted him with a smile and slowly walked up to Krai. There, she met poor Yassim, a bit lost in this situation.

“Let’s g-go,” she said, climbing up.

Yassim was definitely nervous to ride the Black Dragon again, but as they said, the second time could never be worse than the first... Hence, he did his best to climb up behind her on the mighty creature, trying to imitate her movements, until he saw Tessa’s hand extended to help him up.

The three of them were finally on the Black Dragon’s back, and Yassim was brutally reminded of how tall the creature was... From there, the War

God seemed a bit small all of a sudden. The Prince walked up to his dragon, suddenly grabbing its snout and pulling it to him. The creature had still been busy licking and curating the last bits of its meal just a second ago, and growled. The War God stared at the creature, and the next second, the red eyes got a bit less intimidating, staring at its owner with curiosity.

“Watch over them,” simply said the War God.

The dragon stayed quiet for a couple of seconds, before letting out a long, high-pitched growl. Then, the Prince’s eyes went up to meet his daughter’s again. Seated at the back, Yassim couldn’t see what Cessilia looked like but, the next second, the Black Dragon suddenly jumped up in the air.

If he hadn’t already been holding on to the saddle, Yassim would have been thrown off. The dragon climbed fast and high, its large wings violently flapping the air around as it rose higher and higher. The cold morning wind slapping his face suddenly had Yassim realize how grateful he was for that thick coat... The two girls in front of him also wore similar ones, although theirs were made of precious snow leopard fur, white with the characteristic black prints. Yassim also suddenly understood their change of hairstyle: Tessa had bound her little braids around her head to keep it from flying in all directions, and Cessilia too had several little gold chains circling all around to keep it down. Because they were flying higher than before, the wind and cold were much stronger. When he finally dared to look down, Yassim recognized the Onyx Castle as a little black point below.

“We’re right on time for sunrise!” exclaimed Tessa, excited.

Indeed, they were. Right ahead, the tip of the sun had just appeared on the sea, glowing brightly and sending warm colors into the sky ahead. Yassim was struck by this view. He had seen the sunrise before, many, many times in his life. However, never had he been able to witness such a view from the sky.

He could see the miles and miles of sea ahead, its deep blue shades scattering all around the lands. Even more amazing, he was able, for the

first time, to see his homeland from the sky. It was extraordinary. It was like looking at a living map, and he could actually recognize the lines many cultured people had tried to accurately copy on those maps. The various rivers that crossed their Kingdom, scattered like a spider's web into thinner or thicker blue trails.

"This is our first time flying above your country," said Tessa. "We were never allowed to go past the border before..."

"...Welcome to the Eastern Kingdom, my ladies," nodded Yassim, a bit proud.

"C-can you t-tell us more about it?" asked Cessilia, sitting at the front.

"Of course. There are three main rivers crossing our lands. The one most north is called Pseha. Then, the second one, in the middle, is the one with the most ramifications, Soura. And then, the one at the bottom, the largest one that continues to your Empire, is Riva."

"Riva?" repeated Tessa. "It's called Keriva in our Empire, and one of the most dangerous ones. All the places around are swamps..."

"Oh, not many of our people live in the south either. Our villages are mostly gathered around the two other rivers. A lot of our diet revolves around what our fishermen trap there."

"The villages s-seem localized by the sea..." Cessilia noticed, her eyes looking down.

"Yes, my lady. We even have many islands farther east, although not many people live there. They get submerged when the Sea Goddess rises, but we use them to teach our children how to swim, bring our cattle to eat, and put traps to hunt bigger prey."

Yassim suddenly pointed farther down below them.

"See that island, in the Soura bed? It is where our King's Castle is, and our Capital, Aestara."

"Aestara..."

The island was growing bigger, as Krai was slowly starting its descent. They could now see the very, very large river bed and the many little islands in it. It wasn't the sea, as there was a clear line following the coast, showing where the sea actually started. Miles and miles of beaches, yet, there was a clear opening where Soura started, as if the ground had been split apart to let the river through. Among all the islands present, it was easy to guess which one was the Capital: it was the largest, and the one which all the other buildings seemed to be turned toward. However, for a few seconds, the girls didn't understand where the castle was actually located until they understood.

It wasn't just an island among the others; this one was actually topped by a mountain-like city, like a large cone, with many buildings in the lower parts, and at the very top, a castle.

"It's... a t-tidal island?" asked Cessilia.

"Exactly, my lady. Centuries ago, our ancestors took notice that this rocky formation looked like a mountain rising from the sea, and would be a perfect place to defend ourselves while also surveying our lands all around. They started by building a watchtower, but, as time passed, and we relied more and more heavily on the rivers, the tower was made part of a castle, and more buildings appeared all around."

Cessilia could see that watchtower. Actually, despite the magnificent castle built all around, in white stone and large windows, the tower was fiercely standing out, its arrow proudly pointing at the sky. Even the colored glass windows didn't seem to outshine the golden arrow at the top, glowing even more under the sunrise.

"...It's b-beautiful," she whispered.

"With your capital so far away, who knew you guys would have dared to come all the way to wage war with us!" scoffed Tessa.

"We still have quite a few buildings closer to the border," admitted Yassim. "Some are still used as the army's main base, but it has changed greatly over the... last couple of decades..."

Although a bit too blunt, he knew the young woman was perfectly right. They clearly had no interests near the border, as they had focused most of the population, commerce, and cities to the southeast corner of their Kingdom, away from the western border. However, it was a horrible decision that had been made by the wrong people in dire circumstances. Two decades ago or so, their Republic was completely drained of resources. The Dragon Empire couldn't have known about the diseases, the drained rivers, and the hunger that had driven their people mad. Those two girls had probably never experienced hunger themselves...

Yet, Yassim was surprised by the way Cessilia was looking down at the land below them. It looked like she was learning, analyzing each river, each piece of land silently... He had already felt that upon meeting the young woman, but she didn't seem as candid as one would have expected a lady her age to be. Sometimes, there was a strange loneliness in her eyes, and the impression of someone who had gone through a lot, rather than a young, sheltered princess.

"Old man, where do we land?" asked Tessa over her shoulder. "This guy needs a large spot to go, or we're going to scare everyone in the middle of the city plaza!"

"Head to the tower," nodded Yassim. "On the lower left side, there's a little courtyard with a lot of ivy leaves and a mosaic on the floor. There should be enough space for the... for us to land."

"Got it!"

He realized Tessa and Cessilia had been directing the dragon all this time, with small taps or words. Once again, Cessilia leaned forward, whispered something to the dragon, and it changed direction, heading for the spot Yassim had indicated.

As relieved as he was to be home, poor Yassim was also getting more and more nervous, as if riding a gigantic, mythical creature hadn't been enough emotions already for that morning. Below them, life in the Eastern Kingdom seemed to be going as it should be, with the people slowly

waking up to another morning. Perhaps some would get a fright upon noticing the dark silhouette of a dragon in the sky...

Finally, Krai softly landed in that courtyard that was actually just big enough for the dragon. Tessa helped Yassim down, and Cessilia got down on the other side. They were in a pretty courtyard with, as Yassim had described, lots of ivy climbing up the walls and little pillars all around them. There was a little water fountain to the side, and Krai went to drink some of it right away while Cessilia patted its neck.

“It d-does feel d-different from home,” she said. “More... humid.”

“Well, we are surrounded by water, my lady. This area is actually where some of the future doctors come to study, and I live here myself.”

“This is your home?” asked Tessa, surprised.

“Well, the castle is home to all of His Majesty’s entourage, including the Counselors, like myself.”

“Oh, so you’re like our Aunt Phemera,” nodded Tessa. “She’s our Empress’ advisor too, and she lives in the palace because of that...”

“Yes, my lady.”

Although, from what he had observed, the Imperial Palace of the Dragon Empire was at least three or four times bigger than this castle... Yassim was glad it was too soon for any student to be here. Their arrival probably hadn’t gone unnoticed. He let out a long sigh while the girls took off their coats, leaving them on Krai’s back among their other belongings.

“What now?” asked Tessa. “Will you give us a tour, or—”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence, and instead, turned toward the ruckus that was happening at one end of the courtyard. Despite their outfits being different from the ones used in the Empire, those men were clearly guards. Yassim swallowed his saliva, while six men lined up, taking out their swords in a defensive stance.

“Former Royal Counselor Yassim, the King requests your immediate presence in the throne room! You shall explain yourself for your return

upon your exile ordered by the King, as well as bringing in foreigners, and their... their b-beast.”

The man’s eyes went to Krai, filled with fear. He was doing his best not to show it, but as soon as the dragon’s red eyes went on him, he couldn’t help but slightly change his position, ready to step back or protect himself. Krai didn’t care much, though; the dragon was busy sniffing one of the pillars and its climbing plants.

Meanwhile, Cessilia and Tessa both turned toward Yassim, the latter putting her hands on her hips.

“...Forgot to tell us something, old man?” she groaned.

“My ladies,” sighed Yassim. “From now on, I will have to rely on your understanding...”

For someone who was getting arrested right in front of them, Yassim seemed suspiciously calm and composed. Cessilia and Tessa exchanged another glance. They had tried to stop the soldiers with Tessa taking a step forward, but Yassim had asked them not to. It looked as if the old man had already anticipated all this, and was surrendering willingly, although it was odd. Moreover, none of the soldiers were actually acting rude to him or had even tried to bind him in any way. They simply flanked the former Counselor, a hand on each of his shoulders and the other on their spears. There was obviously some respect there, perhaps because Yassim was obviously not going to resist them in any way.

“My ladies,” he said very calmly. “I am sorry for deceiving you. However, this shameless old man would be very grateful if you could accompany me again.”

The two young women once again exchanged another glance with each other. It was obviously all part of his plan. From the way those soldiers had arrived right away and focused on Yassim rather than them or even their dragon, there was something at play here... Cessilia nodded. She already trusted Yassim, although it was clear he had deliberately hidden some of the truth from them. She was also curious to see why he had risked everything just to bring her here.

“C-Captain,” whispered one of the men. “What about the... that...”

He was obviously sending worried glances toward the dragon behind the girls, although Krai didn't seem to care at all. The soldiers were visibly confused, and not prepared for such an issue. Tessa chuckled, crossing her arms.

“What? Never seen a dragon before?”

Meanwhile, Cessilia turned around and walked back to Krai, gently petting its neck. She then whispered something to the dragon, who took off with most of their luggage still on its back. The girls only had time to unload one bag each, but that wasn't an issue for now. Turning around, she smiled gently at Yassim, bringing some relief to the old man.

The soldiers were confused by the situation here and were exchanging glances. The six of them were already doing an impressive job at trying to do their job while faced with a dragon just a minute ago and the arrival of the two foreign women with an exiled counselor... Sparing them any more questions, Yassim gave them a gentle smile and joined his hands together like a benevolent grandfather.

“Alright, gentlemen. His Majesty should be holding the morning court right now... Shall we get going?”

“Counselor Yassim, those women...”

“These ladies are my guests, and I believe His Majesty would like to meet them also.”

The soldiers were troubled, but at least, they knew what to do next. Would the King really be happy about the exiled old man coming back with strangers? They had no idea what gave him so much confidence, but they were willing to roll with it. It wasn't their heads that were at risk here...

The little group began moving, the six soldiers staying close to surround all three of them. Tessa was sending glares each time her eyes met with one of the soldiers, or they inadvertently came too close. Cessilia was more absorbed in the architecture around them. Unlike the Dragon Empire's Imperial Palace, this castle was mostly composed of large, gray

stones and small spaces. The first corridor they walked through to get inside was surprisingly narrow to them, but it still had small little windows of tinted glass every three or four steps, which let plenty of light in. Unlike the white marble she was accustomed to, this castle had the same stones for walls and floors, and at times, a long jute rug would appear to cover the uneven stones. Everything in there felt foreign to the two young women, and they started walking close to each other without even noticing. Cessilia was surprised how little water fountains would sometimes appear randomly on a wall, or in a little sculpture in the middle of a crossway between corridors. The ceiling was lower than the high ones of their home, but it sometimes had strange openings, like a balcony, that would give a little view of a floor below or above.

At some point, they walked into a corridor that had the right wall half-open and showed a large, square room below. A handful of people were there, working at desks in what seemed to be a little library or study. It was very silent, and none of them even raised their heads as Yassim's group walked above. It was obvious everyone was used to those little balconies, but it fascinated Cessilia. In her aunt's palace, all the corridors were very wide and had arches so one could see the gardens on either side of it, and the rooms had a ceiling high enough that no man could reach... Here, it felt as if her father would have only had to raise his hand to touch it.

"I'm very sorry I wasn't as honest as I had hoped to be with you, my lady," suddenly said Yassim. "There are circumstances... I am grateful for your benevolence."

Cessilia didn't answer. She understood that Yassim only meant to apologize, but wasn't asking for her forgiveness. It was too soon for her to judge. Instead, the young woman was a lot more curious about what was going to happen next.

Finally, the guards stopped in front of a pair of large, blue doors. Although they clearly led to an important room, they still looked small to the two young women, and Tessa frowned, wondering if two big, wooden panels were actually meant to protect anything... They could hear what was going

on inside too. Some people were loudly shouting at each other, apparently trying to make a point. The soldiers hesitated for a little while, waiting until there was a bit less noise to bang on the doors and enter.

They hadn't expected to see such a grand room after all they had seen so far. Yet, this was obviously the heart of the castle. A big, round room, with large windows of blue-colored glass, and an impressive mosaic under their feet. Their entrance caused everyone present to suddenly go quiet.

There were only nine beautifully sculpted, dark wooden chairs, arranged in a circle, and two of them were empty. Only seven people were seated, but each had a little group behind them, from two to as many as seven people. It was clear the people present were all some sort of nobility, or at least wealthy in some way. Tessa glanced over their wooden or silver jewelry, the colored fabric of their clothes, and the few fur capes. Yassim clearly hadn't lied about the wealth difference. The two young women were like walking treasures compared to everyone else who was present. Aside from theirs, the only gold items in the room were a couple of rings, a necklace, and a bracelet, all worn by the same group of people.

Everyone was staring at them in awe as they walked into the center. Tessa wasn't afraid to hold their gaze either. Their appearance was causing a commotion, and those people were already watching in amazement, glaring and whispering conspicuously. Because they were standing behind Yassim and four of the soldiers, they could only see more and more of the room as they walked farther in. Unlike her cousin, Cessilia was more absorbed in the architecture around them than the dozens of stares they were getting. This was the only room with a high, round, and vaulted ceiling, and the mosaic up there, similar to the one under their feet, was a breathtaking piece of art.

“How dare you come back?!”

The deep voice resonated throughout the room, sending a chill down everyone's back.

Tessa and Cessilia stopped walking and glanced at each other. The King. They couldn't see him because he was straight ahead, and their vision was

blocked by the five men in between. Yet, even without seeing him, they could feel the weight of his presence in everyone else's reaction. Cessilia glanced around them. Everyone in the room was tense, and suddenly looking down, as if they had been scared to make eye contact with the King, even by chance. Only the people seated were looking in their direction, their eyes going on either Yassim or the two girls, visibly worried.

But worried for whom...?

"Greetings, my King," said Yassim, sounding strangely composed.

"You were banished," hissed the King, his words as sharp as blades. "How dare you defy your King and come back?!"

"This humble servant didn't disobey, my King. I merely followed your own orders."

"Ha," scoffed the King. "Then, who is it? Are you aware you brought a woman to be killed by my hands, Yassim? Do you think I'd indulge them for the sake of you?"

Tessa put a hand on her bag, where her blades were hidden, frowning. In any case, she was ready to defend her cousin and kill that King if necessary. She wasn't scared of these people... However, as she glanced to her right, Cessilia's expression didn't seem to hold anything like fear either. Instead, she had her green eyes riveted right ahead, looking almost... expectant. Her cousin's chest was rising up and down with her accelerated breathing, and her lips were slightly open. Tessa released her fingers on the bag, wondering what was going on...

"My King charged me with the heavy task of finding him a prospective wife. Your Highness, you said this old Counselor of yours was allowed to bring one, and, if she became Your Majesty's Queen among all the possible candidates, you would spare my life and retract my banishment."

"I didn't think you'd dare try, you senile old man. So you've chosen death."

“I believe I have chosen to try and remain by my master’s side, my King. Please, will you allow this senile old man to introduce his candidate?”

“This is inadmissible!” suddenly shouted one of the men seated. “How dare this traitor come back?! Your Majesty, you don’t have to listen to this decrepit traitor! The candidates have already been chosen! This—!”

The man suddenly went mute as he turned his head toward the King, and his eyes opened wide in fright. He immediately went back to looking down, visibly terrified.

They all heard a scoff.

“See, Yassim, no one wants you here. Did you think I was being kind to you because I gave you a reason to be allowed back? Fine, then. Let’s see who was insane enough to follow your lies all the way here...”

Yassim bowed slightly, and every soldier stepped aside, letting the two girls appear.

Only Cessilia stood forward, unafraid. She walked ahead, past all the men, and to the center of the room, facing the King. She was stunning in her own way, standing tall and facing the sovereign, unafraid. Her skin was lighter than anyone else in the room, and yet it was a warm, beautiful, brown-copper shade that contrasted with those amazing, green eyes. Not only that, but she wore a striking purple dress under a white fur coat, and all that gold...

All eyes turned to the King, waiting to see his reaction to the foreign woman.

It wasn’t anything like they expected.

Ashen the White was seated on the simplest throne in the room, although his was in silver metal, without any decoration, cushion, or embellishment of any kind. The King himself didn’t wear any jewelry, crown, or expensive fabric. He was even half-naked, the scars on his exposed torso visible to all. Yet, he was standing out more than anyone else in the room. His white hair, as white as snow, was falling in irregular waves on his large, muscular shoulders, a striking contrast to his dark skin. His face

was sculpted with thick lines and a square jaw with a few spikes of a growing beard sticking out. Despite him looking no older than thirty, there was something scarily deep and ancient in his dark eyes. The dark circles beneath them made it even worse, burying his irises deeper in the shadows. He didn't seem human, or like he was the same kind as the other people standing in the room. He exuded an aura of death and danger like a resting predator. The silver chair may as well have been a god's throne... a god of death. Anyone with any experience in battles could tell he was a warrior and a merciless killer. The way all the other people in the room physically reacted to his presence reeked of sheer terror.

Cessilia was the only one not to display an ounce of fear.

Instead, as she appeared before him, the King's previous irritated expression fell. An incredible silence befell the room as if they had all been transported to a sacred place. In fact, they were witnessing an epic scene, a living painting. There seemed to be no one else but those two people, and all the others were quiet witnesses. No one could understand what was happening, but it felt breathtaking. The complex emotion on the cold-blooded King's face, and the Princess' pure, candid gaze she held without fear.

Even Yassim was shocked by what he was seeing. Before any of them had realized, the King was standing, his eyes riveted on the young woman as if he couldn't believe his eyes. There was something happening between those two people, something deep, complex, and... personal.

"Y-Your Highness," mumbled Yassim, "this is Princess Cessilia, daughter of the Dragon Empire, niece of Her Highness the Empress."

The King didn't reply. In fact, it was as if he hadn't heard the old man at all. His eyes were still riveted on Cessilia as if he was seeing a ghost, or a monster.

The Princess was the first to react. Very slowly and gracefully, she bowed, her long hair sliding down her shoulders as she lowered her head to him.

"K-King... Ashen," she simply said in a delicate voice.

That was it, yet those words looked as if she had slapped the King. In utter shock, his subjects saw him take a step back. Something felt wrong about all of this, something no one else could understand. However, the King didn't reply to the Dragon Empire's Princess. He clenched his fists, and instead, directed his furious glare toward Yassim.

"You cunning old snake..." he hissed, looking like he was about to murder the elder.

Everyone in the room was trying to make sense of this situation. Was the King sparing the Princess because of the Dragon Empire? Why was that young woman completely unafraid? How was old Yassim even still alive after daring to do such a thing? More importantly, what was that reaction earlier...?

"Y-Your Majesty," said one of the nobles. "You don't have to add the... Princess to the candidates. If you refuse her, we can... send the lady back to her homeland."

As he said that, the man had looked at Cessilia, but she hadn't reacted at all. In fact, he should have watched his King instead. Ashen suddenly turned his murderous glare to him, and the man felt his lifespan vanish at once. Normally, after that, there would have been no way to keep his head on his shoulders. Not when the King was visibly about to have him pay for those words with his life.

Yet, nothing came. The King looked stuck where he was, unable to unleash his usual display of complete violence.

"...She stays," he hissed between his clenched teeth.

Everyone there was once again rendered speechless. What was wrong with the King? He could have obviously refused Yassim's offer, sent those women back where they came from, and killed the old man once and for all! In fact, that was the most optimistic ending everyone had foreseen the minute Yassim had reappeared!

Being unable to grasp the King's reactions was certainly scarier than his usual murderous ones. Everyone in the room kept staring, in utter dismay.

No one dared to say a thing anymore. Instead, they were trying to make sense of this, or ready to give up as long as they'd keep their heads. Even Tessa, a few steps behind her, was staring at her cousin and the King in confusion. She had known Cessilia since they were children, and she found something unusual in her cousin's behavior. She had never been one to step forward like this or stand out at all. Yet now, she was dominating the room, almost equal to that ruthless King. Even more intriguing was the way that ruthless King was staring at Cessi...

With everyone deeply involved in this odd situation here, and those two people who kept staring at each other as if a world belonged between them, they all failed to notice the new appearance.

She silently stepped out from the shadows behind the King. Her red dress floating around her, the young woman walked with a smile on her lips, stepping fearlessly next to the King. She had deep red hair, a hint of sharpness in her black eyes, and was amazingly beautiful. Her chuckle resonated as she stood very close to the King, her breast almost touching his arm. With a smile on her red lips, she leaned to whisper in his ear.

“Do we have guests, my King?”

The King didn't react or answer her, but she didn't seem offended at all. Instead, she kept a perfect smile, and put a hand on his shoulder, staring at Cessilia with him.

Cessilia had stopped staring at the King to shift her green eyes to the woman standing next to him. It wasn't just that woman's attitude that was shocking.

It was her olive skin tone.

The two cousins exchanged a quick glance, both disturbed. They had never seen anyone with a skin color this close to their mothers' before. There had been a brief trend about women trying to lighten their skin, but it wasn't anything like they were witnessing now. This woman by the King's side was clearly mixed, like them, and more fair-skinned than dark. Although her hair was more likely to be artificially tainted, she couldn't fake her skin color so easily, nor how her traits were reminiscent of a long-

forgotten race of people, the same race both Tessa and Cessilia were descendants of.

The Rain Tribe.

“Welcome, Your Highness,” she said with that beautiful smile, “...and... I suppose I’m talking to the famous traitor, Sir Yassim. It must have been a long journey back from the Dragon Empire.”

The way she spoke, in a gentle and whispery manner, was troubling. Something in Cessilia’s mind told her this woman was acting polite, but not friendly. Even her attitude as she stood next to the King spoke volumes. She had no fear and displayed her pride and self-confidence without an ounce of hesitation.

Tessa glared at Yassim, hoping they’d get an explanation for this too, but the old man looked baffled. From that woman’s speech, he had visibly never met her in person. However, anyone could see how familiar she was with the King. If it had been the Dragon Empire, she surely would have been some sort of concubine, but here, the girls were unsure. Everything was new; they couldn’t be sure of anything. The rules and customs ought to be different from their homeland...

Instead, Tessa glanced around. In fact, all the nobles present were either ignoring that woman or looking upset by her. So, she wasn’t too popular with anyone here... Yet, she stood by the King’s side like this?

Meanwhile, Cessilia was still staring at the odd couple facing her. Her expression had changed, and her green eyes showed something bitter compared to before.

As a few seconds passed in silence, the red-haired woman sighed.

“Looks like I ruined the mood here. I am Jisel, the King’s attendant...”

Tessa raised an eyebrow. Attendant? This woman was clearly the King’s mistress.

The King suddenly sat back on his throne with a sullen expression. He was still staring at Cessilia and hadn’t reacted at all to Jisel’s appearance,

but it didn't seem to matter. The red-haired woman kept her perfect smile on and took a step back, standing just one foot behind the throne, her hands behind her back.

"Enough," groaned the King. "Resume."

In just two words, the whole atmosphere changed, every noble in the room eager to please. The soldiers that were flanking Yassim quickly moved aside, leaving the old man free for now. His shoulders visibly relaxed, but Yassim didn't forget his primary mission. He was about to gently guide Cessilia and her cousin to the side when Jisel spoke up.

"Ah, the guests should take the empty seats. We aren't waiting for anyone."

Although that seemed like an innocent and considerate couple of sentences, both girls noticed how Yassim's expression fell while hearing this, and the other nobles looked down too. Neither Cessilia nor Tessa moved, waiting for the old man to indicate how to react. Yassim silently clenched his fist and nodded painstakingly.

"...I see."

"I'll s-stand," suddenly said Cessilia.

All eyes turned to her, visibly surprised not by her stutter, but by how openly she defied the King's woman's offer. She didn't even look her way and wasn't looking toward the King anymore. Instead, she simply stood behind old Yassim as he had moved aside, actually standing next to those two empty seats.

Tessa nodded and did the same, both young women standing behind Yassim. They weren't so blind as to ignore what was going on completely. There were nine seats in this room, aside from the King's, and Yassim had mentioned nine lords during their trip there. Judging from his shattered reaction and Jisel's words, they could easily imagine what had happened, and why they shouldn't sit in those seats. The reactions of the nobles weren't all the same this time. Some kept staring at them, clearly intrigued, some subtly nodded, and some shook their heads.

“As you wish,” chuckled Jisel.

One of the nobles standing sighed, and stepped forward, taking the middle spot of the room they had stood in just before.

“Your Highness, with the addition of Princess Cessilia from the Dragon Empire, this now makes a total of ten candidates as to who your future Queen might be.”

The King wasn't looking at the old man at all. Instead, his eyes were still fixated on the Princess, unblinking, with a frown on.

Cessilia, however, wasn't staring his way at all anymore. She was slightly leaning toward Yassim, who had just whispered to her.

“This is Counselor Yamino, an old friend. He is a good man.”

Tessa and Cessilia slightly nodded, listening to Counselor Yamino's words.

“I shall repeat the agreement for the Princess of the Dragon Empire. According to the rules agreed by the... seven noble families, each family and Royal Counselor is free to introduce any young woman of marriageable age as a King's Candidate. Each candidate and her family shall receive ten thousand silver coins as compensation.”

Tessa silently smirked, glancing to the side to see which of the nobles had reacted to that sentence. So some of them had probably traded their daughters for some money...

“Each candidate will receive a room and stay for at least a month within the castle. During the time spent here, the candidates are free to access any area of the castle they please and use their free time as they will. However, they have the obligation to attend all the social events organized by the Royal Castle, the official meetings like this one, and obey each of the King's orders. Any refusal or absence to any of the aforementioned rules will result in the elimination of the candidate, who will be sent home and have all the previous rewards confiscated.”

Cessilia grimaced, and so did her cousin. They had to obey all of the King's orders? This rule felt horribly ominous...

“His Majesty will select his future bride among the candidates. The family of the chosen candidate will receive, among other presents, ten thousand gold coins and eternal glory. The new Queen will be the official Queen of our Eastern Kingdom, and mother to all the official heirs to the throne. She will assume all the responsibilities of her rank and position, and be the King's left hand in all but military matters.”

Another rule that the War God's daughter and niece did not appreciate at all. All but military matters? Now that they looked around them, all the women present looked very fragile and delicate. None of them looked like they could lift a weapon...

The Counselor took a deep breath, briefly glancing toward Cessilia before resuming.

“Today is the final call for all the selected candidates. If any candidate or her family wishes to withdraw, this is the last chance before they are officially entered. No punishment will be held against those who choose to retract now. I will call the names of each candidate and have them confirm, as well as their families.”

One by one, the Counselor called out each of the candidates. Surprisingly enough, they all answered loud and clear their will to partake in this competition to be crowned Queen, but only half of the said candidates seemed to actually be present here, aside from Cessilia. In each case, a member of the family gave an excuse for their candidate not being there, claiming she was ill or still on her way, and no one objected to this. Cessilia felt out of place listening to this. She hadn't thought she was walking into a competition with other women... and she didn't like it at all.

“Cessi, we can go home,” whispered Tessa as the Counselor was still calling out the others. “This is ridiculous, you're a princess, there's no reason for you to compete for that crazy guy...”

Cessilia knew where her cousin's opinion came from. This indeed felt very foolish. However, now, it was clear her fate was intertwined with Yassim's. Moreover, there were still too many questions pending, including why Jisel wasn't called among the candidates. Cessilia had listened. For each candidate, they mentioned her name and her family's, but Jisel never spoke, and everyone seemed to forget her for a few seconds. She wasn't among the competitors...

"...The ninth candidate is Lady Naptunie, introduced by myself, and my niece is willingly partaking in this, she will arrive tomorrow. Finally, uh..."

Yassim glanced toward Cessilia. He knew his life was in her hands, and so did she. Their eyes met, and the young woman nodded slightly. The old man didn't hide the wave of relief in his eyes, instead looking infinitely grateful. He turned to his former colleague, and stepped forward.

"The tenth candidate is Imperial Princess Cessilia of the Dragon Empire, introduced by myself, former Counselor Yassim."

"...Princess Cessilia," called out one of the seven lords, "are you really going to participate?"

"Yes," nodded the Princess.

She hadn't stuttered, nor was she hiding from their gazes. Instead, all the nobles quickly tried to glance the King's way. Ashen had his hand covering his mouth, but his eyes were still fixated on the Princess. It was hard to understand what he was thinking, except for the way his fist was clenched on his throne...

"Well, we have ten candidates then," nodded Counselor Yamino.

Suddenly, the King stood, and all the nobles seated stood one second after him. It was like a storm had suddenly broken into the room, putting everyone present in survival mode. Some were frozen by fear, others looked ready to run away. There was a general movement of stepping away from the throne and the man standing a step in front of it. However, Ashen didn't say anything. He stood there for a couple more seconds, like

a statue of ice with eyes of fire. After one last glare in Yassim and Cessilia's way, he suddenly stormed out of the room.

No one said a word, and it took a couple of seconds after he was gone for anything to be heard, anyone to dare move. It had all happened so quickly, not everyone had understood what had happened.

The only one who could still keep a smile on was Jisel. If she had been shocked by the King's sudden outburst, no one had seen it. She still had her little smile on, and her eyes met Cessilia's. The Princess already didn't like that woman, like a lioness who knew she was faced with a rival. Jisel gave her a little wink and quietly walked out while everyone else still seemed stunned.

The second person to react was Yassim. He turned around and looked at the two women.

"Let's go," he quietly muttered.

They both followed him as he quickly left the room, visibly needing to run away. They had barely walked out when a loud banter exploded inside, many people shouting after the old man and calling to him.

Yassim didn't pay any attention to them and guided the two women out instead. He looked like he finally could control the situation a bit and was guiding them away, through the corridors and farther away from the previous room. After a little while, they seemed sufficiently far enough, although it was only one floor below. He let out a long sigh, a bit out of breath after this speed walking.

"What was that?!" exploded Tessa, clearly unable to hold it in anymore. "A competition to be that crazy bastard's wife? Old man, I should be the one to cut your neck right now!"

"T-Tessa, c-calm down," muttered Cessilia.

"Cessi, I'm not going to calm down! That old schmuck lied to us, and now you have to compete with nine other crazy girls, most of which were probably forced to do this? And you guys think we are barbaric! Our

fathers don't even dare take concubines, and you want to make Cessi beg for this tyrant to marry her while he's already got that red slut on the side!"

"I swear to the gods I had no idea about that woman," said Yassim. "I... I had heard rumors the King had taken in a mistress after I was dismissed, but I never met that woman before."

"She's not a c-candidate?" asked Cessilia, ignoring her furious cousin.

"One needs a strong backing to be appointed a candidate, my lady," said Yassim. "All the women presented before belong to the strongest families of the Kingdom, and even the two Counselors who also introduced candidates are very wealthy men. I wouldn't have been able to pick anyone but you."

"So you came to our Empire to trick Cessi into this mess," groaned Tessa. "Now you're really going to lose your neck, old man. Just you wait until our family hears the—"

"T-Tessa," said Cessilia, suddenly stepping up to her. "S-stop, please. I-I am fine."

Because Cessilia asked her to calm down so frantically, her cousin frowned, tilting her head. She crossed her arms.

"...Cessi, why did you agree to this?"

But instead of answering, her cousin stayed mute and slowly shook her long locks. Tessa noticed her green gaze.

This was the glance Cessilia would make sometimes, when there was something she couldn't say. It was a look she knew all too well, but it broke her heart each time. Ever since that had happened to her cousin, Tessa could tell there was something horribly sad and dark buried in her cousin's heart, trapped in a chest Cessilia always refused to open. Each time she got close to that chest, Cessilia did this. Those sad eyes, and her voice that disappeared... as if she was asking her not to ask anymore. This had to be related to what had happened with the King just before, in that room... Tessa was the first one shocked by it. She thought she knew almost everything about Cessilia, but never had she seen her like that. For perhaps

the first time, something had happened to that glass shell. A crack, perhaps. A little, shy opening into that tightly closed chest...

Tessa took a long breath, trying to keep it in and calm down.

“...Fine,” she grumbled, “but I’m going to make you pay for that later, old man. Or I’m just going to wait for Kassian and Darsan to hear this and come and slice you, and watch.”

“Thank you for your benevolence, Lady Tessa...” muttered poor Yassim. “And once again, I apologize for lying to you like this, Lady Cessilia. However, please know I didn’t do this to trick you, but because I had good reasons to believe my King would... have special feelings for someone from the Dragon Empire.”

“What?” muttered Tessa, confused.

Yassim kept staring at Cessilia, visibly expecting something, but the Princess remained mute. If she wasn’t curious to know what he meant like her cousin, it meant she probably knew the truth... and his theory was right.

“Alright... Let’s move to your new room,” said Yassim, understanding he wouldn’t get an answer now. “I am a humble ex-counselor, but I am sure Counselor Yamino will help me arrange something decent for the Princess and Lady Tessa. You two are technically of higher standing than any of the candidates, after all...”

“It won’t be necessary,” suddenly said Counselor Yamino’s voice.

The man had just appeared, looking a bit out of breath too. He took a second to catch his breath, as he was much more massive than old Yassim. In fact, Yamino was so large his belly almost touched both sides of the corridor. He did look like a good, nice man, though, with his head as round as his belly, and his little, white, curly goatee.

“Counselor Yamino!” exclaimed Yassim, visibly happy to see his friend again.

“You sure still run fast, Yassim,” sighed Yamino. “You’re one crazy old man, to come back after making His Highness so furious... and from the Dragon Empire too.”

“You know me,” replied Yassim with a little smile. “I will never give up on our dear homeland.”

“Ha... If only our young King could still find mercy for old antiques like us. Anyways! The Princess and her...”

“Cousin,” said Tessa. “I’m Tessa, by the way.”

“Oh, nice to meet you, Lady Tessa. And of course, Lady Cessilia, as well. I am Yamino, the oldest Counselor, and the last one mad enough to still be friends with Yassim... or perhaps, lucky enough, seeing he’s still got his head on his shoulders... I came to tell you the ladies are welcome in the Cerulean Suite.”

“The Cerulean Suite?” repeated Yassim, surprised. “But... it’s the best room in the castle! No one has been allowed to use it since the previous King’s favorite! How did you manage to—”

“Oh, I didn’t do anything! It’s an order from the King himself. He ordered the servants to prepare and give that room to the Princess... to Princess Cessilia.”