

Chapter 30

“...Ashen, you should go get treated,” Cessilia muttered, gently patting his shoulder.

“I’m fine,” he shook his head. “We need to get where your brother is and stop the fight there too if possible...”

“There’s no need.”

To their surprise, Kian suddenly arrived with an excited growl, flying next to Cece, mounted by Kassian.

“We’re done over there,” he said.

“Kassian!” exclaimed Cessilia, surprised. “Already?”

“A lot of them were mostly trying to regroup at their headquarters, but it seems like someone already set it on fire...”

“On fire?”

Kassian’s eyes went to the other side of the battlefield, where Cessilia found Nana and Darsan together, chatting excitedly. She turned her eyes back to Tessandra, who shrugged.

“Don’t ask,” sighed Tessa. “I think Nana has turned into a little terror on her own. ...Aren’t you guys going to come down? I’m breaking my neck just watching you up there!”

Cessilia turned to Ashen.

“...You really need to get treated for that poison, Ashen. You can barely stand.”

“I’m not leaving you,” he said. “The last time I did, I almost got killed.”

Cessilia smiled, a bit happy and a bit torn inside. However, Cece had clearly chosen her camp. She lowered herself until the two of them could jump down and land safely. Unfortunately, the Silver Dragon was too large to land there without crushing everyone on the plaza. Luckily, Kian was right there, and as soon as the dragon's rider got off its back too, the older Silver Dragon was only happy to play around with Cece. Soon enough, the two sibling dragons began to play around in the sky, flying and chasing each other's tails with excited growls while Cessilia and the others gathered on the ground.

"...What do we do with them?" Cessilia sighed, looking at the Yekara soldiers.

All of them were still looking confused, and staring at their dead leader with a strange interest.

"Darsan and I can gather them for now," said Tessandra. "I'm sure there will still be a few trying to flee, so we can make sure we get all of them first..."

Ashen shook his head, looking annoyed. He had his arm around Cessilia's shoulders to support himself, but couldn't help but grimace often. Cessilia turned to her cousin.

"...Is Ishira around?"

"Ishira? Uh... didn't she set up some sort of relief tent or something outside?"

Her eyes went to Ashen, and she raised an eyebrow.

"...Did you get your butt rescued again, Your Majesty?" she smirked.

"Not at all. Cessi had time to drink tea while I did everything. I even poured it for her."

"Yeah, sure. Anyway, you're starting to look as white as your hair, so if I were you, I'd actually make that stop by the house, two streets behind me. The Hashat took over a house and are treating people there. It's easy to find, just follow all the big babies whining."

“Noted.”

Ashen sighed, and leaned closer to Cessilia, gently kissing her chestnut curls.

“I’ll be right back.”

“I’m coming with you. I want to check on the injured people and see if there’s anything I can do while Tessa and Darsan gather the Yekara soldiers.”

“I’ll hunt the mercenaries too,” said Kassian, “from the sky. Like Tessa said, some will probably try to flee or hide... Kian!”

Above them, the two dragons were getting a bit too excited, and their growls were growing terribly louder. Not only that, they had begun snapping at each other, their play getting a bit more violent. Kassian sighed, but with a little smile on his lips.

“I can’t blame him. He must have missed his little sister...”

He exchanged a smile with Cessilia, who nodded happily. Indeed, the two dragons’ enthusiasm was heartwarming to see. She knew her older brother was also probably very happy to see Cece back...

“You know, there’s nothing little about our Cece now,” chuckled Tessandra, who was staring at the duo above too. “Kian’s the one looking like he’s the little brother now...”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Kassian.

He winked at his little sister, making Tessandra roll her eyes.

“Ugh. Anyway, you’d better take those two out of the Capital’s skies soon before they destroy something. Plus, once Krai joins the fun, they are going to be impossible to calm. Thank the gods we left that stupid Dran at home...”

Cessilia couldn’t help but think about all of Cece’s siblings at home too. The smaller dragons would be so happy to see their older sister was back...

“Cece will help you put out the fires too,” she told him.

Kassian nodded, and turned around to climb on the roof, probably getting to a higher point to catch the dragons' attention.

“Cece is back?!”

Darsan had run to them. For some reason, he was dragging four men by the collar with each hand, and Nana was following right behind him, her eyes lit up in awe.

“That dragon is so pretty!” she exclaimed.

“There you are, the pair of walking natural disasters,” scoffed Tessandra, putting her hands on her hips. “Yes, she is.”

“Awesome! Hey! Big girl!” Darsan waved, dropping the men at his feet.

“...What are those?”

“Oh, just some that refused to give up, so I kicked their butts, but I wondered what we're supposed to do with them... Nana said not to kill them, so I just figured I'd ask.”

“The war is over, right?” Nana asked Cessilia and the King with a worried expression.

The two of them exchanged a smile.

“Yes, it is.”

“Alright,” said Tessandra. “Darsan, you and I are supposed to gather the Yekara that are left, all of them, so come and help me. Nana, now that you get the gist, can you go get that old butt of a dragon and do the same outside?”

“I got it!” Nana nodded strongly, showing her little fists.

“Let's go, Nana,” exclaimed Darsan happily. “I'll escort you back to Krai!”

The two of them left, and Cessilia turned to Tessandra, confused.

“...Nana actually rode Krai? ...Alone?”

“Yeah... She’s really getting quite impressive, our tiny Nana. But, as long as we keep flammable stuff away from her, we should be alright.”

“...Didn’t you just send her to get an actual dragon?” Ashen asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tessandra opened her mouth, and closed it after a second. After realizing the King’s words were right, she let out a sigh.

“Alright, I’m going to go look after the two terrors. We’ll regroup once you’re better and we’re done here. See you then...”

She shook her head and left toward the crowd, already shouting orders at their allies. Ashen chuckled.

“Your family is just as reckless and impulsive as I remember...”

“And that’s just half of them,” chuckled Cessilia. “Come on, let’s get you treated now.”

The two of them left toward the house Tessandra had indicated. Just like her cousin had said, the place was already crowded with injured men, some with light injuries, some on the verge of dying. Cessilia recognized some of the Hashat people trying to keep them in order, and even some Cheshi helping. Luckily, many people recognized the King. In the short while that they had spoken with Tessandra, the word had already spread about Lord Yebekh’s death, and most people knew the war was over. In a matter of minutes, people gathered around the couple, either thanking them or simply cheering. Cessilia felt a bit overwhelmed by the sudden attention when all Ashen needed was some quiet.

Bastat quickly stepped in between them and the rowdy crowd.

“If you’re all up,” she said, “I guess you can make some room for the people who actually need the space!”

Cessilia was surprised. It was the first time she saw Lady Bastat actually get mad and raise her voice. Right now, the lady was acting like a wall between the two of them and the crowd. The people suddenly got a bit

embarrassed or glared at her, but sure enough, many quietly returned to their beds, or left the building with sour expressions.

“These people,” she sighed. “Really, if they can stand, they should be helping out...”

She turned around to face them, and Cessilia realized the lady herself was injured. Her left arm was wrapped in bandages, and she was limping slightly as well.

“Lady Bastat, are you alright?” Cessilia asked, worried.

“Yes,” the young woman nodded. “Thanks to your older brother. I made a silly mistake during the fight, and His Highness was quick to take me to safety... so I overtook the command here, as much as I could. Luckily, most citizens were reasonable enough to stay home or help their neighbors. It’s mostly Royal Guards coming here injured, or people who got into accidents because of the fires... Are you alright, Your Majesty? You look quite pale.”

Ashen grimaced. Just as Cessilia expected, he hated his condition being pointed out. She stepped forward in his stead.

“Do you think we could get... some privacy? I want to treat him myself, and then I’ll help around here if needed.”

“You can go upstairs. We just emptied one of the bedrooms, so you and His Majesty can take it. I will have some medicine brought to you as soon as possible. Do you know what you’ll need, exactly?”

Quickly, Cessilia listed for Bastat all the herbal medicine she was going to need, and soon after, helped Ashen upstairs. Just as she had suspected, he had been holding on well all this time, but the young King passed out almost as soon as he laid down. Luckily, his life wasn’t in danger. Cessilia treated him quietly with the herbal medicine procured and stitched all the cuts she could find on his body. The more she examined him, the more she was convinced that Kassian’s blood he had been transfused with had helped Ashen considerably. The poison he had received was very potent, yet the treatment he actually needed from her was rather simple. His body

had been fighting the toxins by itself all this time, and the medicine just gave it an extra boost. The blood loss was a bit more worrisome, but now that he could get some rest, he would probably be fine. Cessilia treated him, grateful to finally be able to catch a break.

When she finally stepped out of the room, Ashen was still unconscious, but he was safe. She let out a little sigh of relief. It sounded like things were busy everywhere else in the building, so she barely reacted when someone approached.

“Lady Cessilia?”

“Sabaël!”

She hadn’t expected to see Nana’s older brother here, but it was obvious he was injured as well, his shoulder covered in bandages. He politely bowed a bit.

“Is His Majesty alright?” he asked. “I heard he was brought here too...”

“He’s alright, he’s resting in the room behind me. What about you? What happened?”

“Ah, I got burned a little... It’s really not as bad as it looks, but Tessa insisted I get treated. ...You?”

“I’m fine,” Cessilia nodded. “...Sabaël, can I ask you for a favor?”

He smiled, and glanced at the door behind her.

“I’ll guard His Majesty,” he immediately said, bowing respectfully.

“Don’t worry, no one will dare to enter while I’m here.”

“Thank you.”

The two of them exchanged an understanding smile. Cessilia was glad that there were some loyal, hardworking young men like Sabaël still following Ashen. If people had only been following him because of his alliance with a princess of the Dragon Empire, it would have been far more difficult. Yet today, many Royal Guards had valiantly fought against the Yekara, despite the odds, to defend whom they thought of as their legitimate King. Not only the guards, but many citizens had cheered for

Ashen as well. She could tell when they had walked into this house; many eyes had gone to him, the brave white-haired King. In her heart, she was probably the proudest of his achievements. This Kingdom was indeed in a bad state, but if things continued like this, with one less enemy in their way, she had high hopes for its future.

Feeling a bit better, and relieved about Ashen's condition and safety, Cessilia went back downstairs to help, as promised. In fact, many eyes were happy to see her too, recognizing the Princess' unique appearance. As the battle had ended, many more people were brought in to be treated, and soon, luckily no one was able to bother Cessilia unless it was for a valid injury. Lady Bastat was no healer, but she was doing an amazing job orchestrating everything, even overseeing the stocks of fresh towels and warm water, and coordinating with the other tribes and families to know who could provide what. Strangely, Cessilia felt most relaxed when she was healing someone. The smell of medicinal herbs and the touch of medical tools were making her feel she was in the right place. Helping lessen someone's pain was much more rewarding than inflicting injuries, and she was happy to set her weapons aside. She was so used to treating people that she could do it without much thinking, one patient after the other, for hours. In fact, it was Lady Bastat that finally got her to stop and take a break, almost pulling her away from her last patient and to the side. Then, she made Cessilia sit down, and handed her a familiar fish beignet.

"Thank you," Cessilia smiled.

"You deserve much more than that, but that's all we have for now," sighed Lady Bastat. "You should rest, my lady. We're pretty much done evacuating the battlefields, people coming in now only have light injuries. Many are already busy trying to clear the streets, and I think your other older brother is helping them as well."

"Did you hear from Tessa?"

"She sent someone to say not to worry," Bastat nodded. "They have the situation under control."

"They arrested all the Yekara already?"

Cessilia and Bastat turned their heads, finding Sabael and Ashen standing there, both looking surprised. As a reflex, Cessilia walked up to the King, glancing down at his abdomen.

“I’m fine,” he immediately said. “I shamelessly took a nap while you’ve been working hard.”

“Most people would be passed out for one more day from your injuries, Your Majesty,” Sabael shook his head. “That was only three or four hours.”

“Anyway,” Ashen sighed, “I want to go see how my men are. The Yekara too, I need to decide what to do with them...”

Just like that, the three of them agreed to go out and find Tessandra, leaving Bastat behind to keep supervising the healing and food distribution.

On the way back to the battlefield, Cessilia was amazed by everything that had already been done in the few hours she had been busy treating people. The streets were mostly cleared, most of the rubble having been pushed to the side, and people were already loading carts with what had to be taken away. The bodies of their deceased allies were covered by sheets, and some people were trying to identify them or line them up. Many families had come out of hiding to help sweep the streets, give a hand to those whose homes had been destroyed, or distribute food. Cessilia even spotted children happily handing out warm drinks. The rain had stopped too, and as if to salute the end of the fighting, the sun was starting to shyly appear between the clouds. She held Ashen’s hand with a warm feeling in her heart as they walked down the streets, crossing paths with more and more people who happily waved at their easily recognizable King. She could definitely see herself happily walking down those streets for many more years...

“Oh, look who’s here!”

Tessandra cheerfully waved at them. Funny enough, she, Darsan, and Nana were eating fish beignets around a fire, taking a break as well.

Tessandra walked up to them first, suddenly jumping at Sabael's neck and hugging him.

"Tessa!" he exclaimed, obviously embarrassed. "Easy, please..."

"Did you get treated?" she asked, immediately pulling his jacket open.

"Did you? It's not going to leave a scar, is it?"

"I-I don't know... Why? Will you leave me if I get a scar?"

"Of course not!" she slapped his arm. "I'm just going to get mad if I don't have someone to burn back for damaging my boyfriend!"

"Your boyfriend?" Darsan suddenly frowned. "Since when?"

"You really are slow, Darsan..."

"There's someone who actually wants you?" he laughed.

"Yeah," Tessa retorted with a sour expression. "I think it's a family thing, they really have poor tastes..."

Her eyes went to Nana, making Darsan frown, confused again. Cessilia chuckled, relieved to see all of them seemed completely fine. Nana had a few bandages on her hands and legs, but she was happily smiling at Darsan and Tessa's antics, her plump cheeks stuffed with warm food. Behind the trio, the battlefield was almost cleared already, with more of the Royal Guards still working to sort things out.

"What about the remaining Yekara?" Ashen asked, frowning.

"The Cheshi locked them all up," said Tessandra. "We suspect some of them are still hiding, but we probably got most of them."

"I would say so too," suddenly announced Kassian's voice.

They turned around, and Cessilia's older brother approached from behind them, looking a bit tired. Nana immediately jumped to hand him a beignet.

"Oh, uh, thank you."

"Where have you been?" Tessa frowned. "I saw Kian and Cece flying south minutes ago!"

“I just made a quick stop,” said Kassian, glancing down at his beignet and avoiding eye contact with her.

Cessilia didn't say anything, but she did notice the new bandage around his dominant hand...

Suddenly, Kassian looked up at the sky, and Cessilia and Darsan did the same, getting the same feeling he did. The three siblings were the first to notice the new silhouette in the sky. Soon, all of them had their eyes up, staring at the dark clouds.

“Who is it?” Darsan kept asking, visibly nervous. “What color is the dragon, I can't see!”

“Oh, you're so in trouble,” chuckled Tessandra. “They are going to kick you right back to that stupid mountain...”

“A mountain?” asked Nana, confused.

“I-it's nothing!” Darsan said, embarrassed.

Cessilia kept squinting her eyes to try and see the dragon's color too. It was hard to tell, as it was flying amongst the dark clouds and still quite far away.

“...I think it's green,” she suddenly muttered.

“Ah!” exclaimed Darsan, throwing his fists in the air. “Tessa, you're the one in dragon sh—”

“Shut up!” she shouted back at him. “...It can't be right? Right? Mom freaking hates flying!”

Cessilia was a bit surprised and confused too. Now that it was getting closer, that dragon was definitely Roun, her uncle's Green Dragon. But she couldn't see why her uncle or aunt would be coming all the way here... not even scolding their runaway daughter would be enough to come all the way to the Eastern Kingdom with Roun. Moreover, she was sure her mother would have mentioned to her sister that Tessandra was here, so it wasn't like they would be actively searching for her either.

“...It’s a woman,” squealed Darsan, who was already laughing. “Oh, it’s got to be Aunt Missandra. Tessa, I’m sure you’re about to get your butt whoo—”

“No,” said Kassian. “That’s... No way?”

Cessilia had realized the woman’s identity at the same time. All three siblings and Tessandra exchanged surprised glances, completely dumbfounded.

“Wha-... What the fuck is Grandma doing here?!” exclaimed Tessandra.

“...Is that a bad thing?” asked Sabael, visibly confused by their reactions.

“Oh, love, if you think dragons are scary, just you wait until you meet our grandmother,” sighed Tessandra.

“Speak for yourself,” chuckled Darsan. “I’m Grandma’s favorite.”

“In your dreams, Darsan.”

“What is she doing here?” wondered Cessilia, turning to Kassian. “Do you think something happened back home?”

Her big brother seemed as unsure as her, slowly shaking his head. All of them waited for the Green Dragon to get closer with, indeed, the older woman standing on its back. Because Roun wasn’t as big as the other dragons, it meant the older dragon could land in the plaza, which happened to have much more space available now. The Green Dragon landed gracefully, its yellow eyes riveted on Tessandra, its snout immediately nudging her.

“Hi there,” muttered Tessandra, petting her father’s dragon.

However, like her cousins, she was a little more preoccupied by the imposing woman riding the dragon.

“Grandma!” exclaimed Darsan, the only one overjoyed.

He ran to the dragon’s side, helping their grandmother get off its back.

With one glance at that woman, Nana realized whom Cessilia got her height from. Not only that, but the woman was incredibly beautiful, with

long hair dyed a burgundy color, a gorgeous long dress a shade darker, and countless pieces of golden jewelry. Her eyes were even more impressive, almond-shaped and as dark as obsidian gems. It looked as if a goddess had just elegantly landed in front of them. She got down from the dragon gracefully with her grandson's help. As soon as she was on the ground, she turned around and with long fingers and nails, gently pinched Darsan's cheek.

"Hello there, my darling."

Darsan took the pinching without blinking, a large smile stuck on his face.

"Grandma, what are you doing here?" asked Cessilia, stepping forward.

"What do you mean, 'What am I doing here?'" her grandmother retorted, turning back to them. "I prepared for days and then bothered to go all the way to that cold, gloomy Onyx Castle only to find your imbecile father all alone! Then, I have to take a long trip, all by myself, to that stupidly huge palace, and listen to that selfish daughter of mine happily announcing that half of my dearest grandchildren actually went all the way to the Eastern Kingdom! What did you expect, of course I had to come and check on my grandbabies! Those selfish brats never think of me!"

Sabael was starting to understand what Tessa meant; that woman was already scary enough with her imposing voice, but she was even referring to the Dragon Empress and the War God as... selfish brats?! He glanced around, and all four of her grandchildren had visibly shrunk, a bit cautious about their grandmother's terrible temperament.

"Sorry, Grandmother," said Kassian. "Everything happened a bit suddenly—"

"You," she suddenly pointed a finger at Ashen. "You're the reason my dear granddaughter came here, aren't you?"

"Long time no see, Lady Kareen," Ashen bowed.

"Oh, don't act all cute with me," she scrunched her nose. "I'll take care of you later, you little brat."

Ashen grimaced, but nodded, a bit helpless. Cessilia couldn't help but bite her lower lip, selfishly enjoying this scene. Only her grandmother could make Ashen look this tame...

“What happened here?!” exclaimed the older lady, looking around. “I just came here and this is the landscape? What did you children do this time?”

“Just a war, Grandma,” Tessandra sighed. “It wasn't even our fault, and we did win, by the way.”

“If you won, how come this place is so messy?! Didn't my son teach you all how to fight without making this much of a mess?! And this!”

She grabbed Darsan's arm, pointing at an injury on his biceps.

“Who dares to injure one of my precious grandsons?!” she shouted, furious. “I hope you kept those bastards alive so I can finish them off myself!”

“I'm fine, Grandma. Plus, their leader's already dead,” said Darsan. “We were just rounding the survivors up at the moment—”

“Oh, were you?”

A vicious smile appeared on the woman's lips, sending a chill down Nana and Sabael's spines. The speed in which her mood completely shifted from anger to amusement was scary.

“Keep some of them for me then. Their leaders. I'm going to teach them what happens to whoever dares to touch my grandbabies!”

“...Grandma, you just came to have fun, didn't you?” chuckled Tessa.

Before she could react, a loud and scary smack echoed. Sabael only had to turn his eye to see Lady Kareen with a closed fan in her hands, and Tessandra holding her head with a grimace.

“Grandma, what the heck was that for?!” she cried, rubbing her painful scalp.

“Discipline,” she shrugged. “You're way too noisy. Now, Cessilia, my dear.”

“Yes, Grandmother?” Cessilia stepped forward.

“Did I see my dear Cece flying earlier? Your dragon is back?”

“Yes, Grandmother,” she smiled. “She’s back and she’s fine.”

“...Hmpf. It was high time.”

With a complex expression, Lady Kareen suddenly opened her fan and began fanning herself slowly, glancing around. It was as if she was annoyed to even be gracing the soil with her presence. Then, her eyes settled on Nana and Sabael, an eyebrow raised. The two of them were still mute and very unsure about the scary arrival of the legendary War God’s own mother. The older lady was unlike any elder they had ever met before.

“Grandma!” exclaimed Darsan, jumping at the occasion.

He suddenly pushed Nana forward with his big smile.

“This is Naptunie!”

“Naptunie, is it?” said Lady Kareen.

“Y-yes, my lady...”

Nana was literally sweating bullets, unsure if she was supposed to hold her stare or not. Fidgeting with her fingers as her nervousness rose, she glanced toward Cessilia and Tessandra, who both seemed just as confused. After a long while, Kareen smiled.

“I like her,” she simply said.

“Right?!” exclaimed Darsan with a proud expression. “Our Nana is the best.”

“...That’s it?” muttered Tessandra. “It’s not like Nana’s wearing her big brains in plain sight...”

Kareen then turned to Sabael and Tessandra tensed up. Meanwhile, with an amused smile on her lips, Cessilia subtly moved toward Ashen, leaning against him while watching the poor, nervous Sabael being scrutinized by her grandmother.

“...What is your name?” she asked coldly.

“Sabael, Your Highness,” he immediately answered, bowing with his soldier’s reflexes, “from the Dorosef Tribe. I’m a Royal Guard and Naptunie’s older brother.”

“Are you?”

“He’s my boyfriend,” added Tessandra with a confident smile.

Her grandmother’s eyes very briefly shifted to Tessandra.

“...Is he?”

It was as if she was testing the two of them. Cessilia saw Sabael very clearly take a deep breath in and nod, his hand tight around his sword’s handle.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“My granddaughter is quite the wildcat,” said Kareen, rubbing her finger against her lips with an enigmatic expression.

“I know, Your Highness. But I’ve learned to like her character.”

“She is a strong woman, like all my children; most men don’t think well of a woman who can beat them.”

“My pride isn’t so small nor fragile that it could be damaged by a defeat, Your Highness,” Sabael replied, his eyes stuck on the ground, “no matter who it is against. I will keep training until I can stand on equal ground to Lady Tessa.”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a surprised look. It was the first time Sabael spoke so much, and to speak about his relationship with Tessandra too. Not only that, but he was impressive in how he proudly stood his ground against one of the most powerful women in this world... After a long while, another mysterious smile appeared on Lady Kareen’s lips.

“Oh, well. Perhaps you’ve found your match after all, Tessandra.”

“Right?” Tessandra smiled, undeniably the proudest.

“Now,” said Lady Kareen, turning to them, “your grandmother is thirsty, tired, and bored after flying on a dragon to come all the way here and visit her runaway grandchildren. Are none of you going to properly welcome me yet?”

“Technically, no one invited you, Grandma...” muttered Tessandra.

She was smart enough to cover her scalp before her grandma decided to hit her again. Cessilia chuckled, and turned to Nana instead.

“The castle is mostly destroyed at the moment... and not good to welcome Grandmother. Do you think there is a better place?”

“W-well, if it’s alright,” said Nana, “we could go to my family home, but... it’s much, much smaller than a palace... probably.”

Kareen rolled her eyes.

“Only my children have grown used to unnecessarily large palaces and castles!” she exclaimed. “I may have mothered a bunch of dragon brats, but I wasn’t born on a bed of gold! Dear, your house will be just fine, as long as there’s a place for me to sit other than a bunch of scales! No offense to you, my darling, thank you for the trip.”

She put a quick kiss on Roun’s snout, and turned to Nana.

“Lead the way, darling.”

Naptunie enthusiastically nodded, while Darsan jumped to his grandmother’s side to offer his arm to escort her. In fact, as she calmly walked away, it was quite impressive that she barely seemed to need any help to walk through the absolute wreck that was the plaza in high heels. Tessandra watched the trio walk away, still rubbing her scalp.

“...Is that old hag never going to get... old?” she groaned. “How the heck does she not age?”

Cessilia chuckled.

“It’s Grandma. ...Do you think she’s really here just because she missed us?”

Before Kassian could answer, her cousin rolled her eyes.

“You know Grandma,” scoffed Tessandra. “She makes people come to her, not the other way around. I bet she left without telling anyone just to piss off our aunt again. You know the only thing that makes the Empress really crazy is when her own mother decides to cause a mess elsewhere...”

“A mess?” Ashen frowned. “What kind of mess?”

“Nothing,” chuckled Cessilia. “Grandma’s bored and came to see us to be amused.”

“...And piss off Auntie.”

“Anyway, should we go too?” Kassian sighed. “To be honest, I’m getting hungry as well. We can probably leave the Clan Leaders and the Cheshi to settle things here.”

“And we could all use a shower,” added Tessandra with a frown. “I’m smelling worse than Roun and it is definitely not a great sensation.”

They all agreed to slowly follow Lady Kareen and Nana’s lead.

It felt a bit strange, after the whole ordeal, to simply walk away from the battlefield, but they were indeed not needed so much anymore. The Cheshi were already guarding the captured Yekara, and it would take a little while longer before they were all properly made prisoners and sorted in one place. The dragons had also helped hasten the capture of those who remained outside the Capital’s Outer Wall, so the only enemies still free had chosen to flee for their lives, most likely the mercenaries. In fact, Cessilia was pretty sure it had turned into a giant hunting party for their dragons, as Tessandra confirmed when Roun took off.

“Just go get them!” she patted her father’s dragon before it flew off.

They watched the Green Dragon slowly climb up in the sky and meet with Cece and Kian, the three of them playing for a bit before disappearing behind the buildings of the Capital, toward the south behind the Outer Wall. Although they couldn’t see the dragons anymore, they could hear them all, including Krai, and tell they were probably having some fun.

Cece was so big that they could sometimes see the silver body shining in the sky before the dragon dove down again.

“Is it alright to leave the dragons outside to hunt?” frowned Ashen.

“Don’t worry,” said Kassian. “They know how to recognize mercenaries. Father used to send them all the time to hunt the marauders or bandits in the Northern Mountains when we were younger. They know not to touch villagers and innocents. They can smell who has their hands covered in blood or not, and your people already know the dragons are on their side. They probably won’t be so silly as to run away.”

Ashen nodded, but he might have still been a bit worried. Cessilia wasn’t. In fact, she had never felt so relieved and happy. To see Cece happily playing around and flying was the best blessing she could have received. She knew her dragon was just as happy to be back and to reunite with their dragon family. In fact, her family back home probably already knew of Cece’s return as well.

With a lighter heart, she held on a bit tighter to Ashen, her arm around his waist, and they walked together to the main house of the Dorosef Tribe. Apparently, Lady Kareen had really taken a liking to the younger girl, and they could hear Naptunie enthusiastically presenting every street of the city, explaining the various tribes, and what shops had the best items, while Darsan followed right behind her, listening to her every word.

“...I’ll never understand those two,” sighed Tessandra. “To think the nervous Nana would be so fearless in front of Grandma...”

“Why do you let your grandmother hit you?” grimaced Sabael, glancing at her scalp.

“Trust me, it’s much worse if you try to run.”

Cessilia chuckled. In fact, she wasn’t surprised that Lady Kareen had immediately taken a liking to Naptunie. Their friend was bright and loveable, and after a lifetime of schemes and intrigues, there was nothing their grandmother enjoyed more than simple, kind-hearted people. Which was probably why she liked the candid Nana and Darsan alike.

While they walked, Cessilia couldn't help but glance around at the sad state of the Capital. It had suffered a lot from the battle. Some streets were completely ravaged and blocked, and some houses had been destroyed by the fire. There was a heavy smell of ashes, smoke, and blood soaking the whole place. For once, Cessilia wished the rain was a bit heavier so it would have washed it all away, but there was now only a gentle drizzle over them. Strangely though, there was none of that strange post-battle quietness she would have expected. In fact, the whole Capital seemed determined to resume life as fast as possible. Every street they saw, people were already trying to find a way to clear paths, build back the houses, and help whoever needed it. She saw women guarding many children together, and men working together to sort out debris. Some children were even playing with the ice and snow that Cece had left on several buildings, discovering the cold, white powder for the very first time in their life. A few even seemed to have fun trying to chase the dragons' shadows when one flew over.

Many Royal Guards that had fought by their side were offering to help where they could, but also receiving food or treatment from the grateful citizens. In fact, many eyes didn't even notice as their little group walked past, everyone busy on their own. Cessilia realized the Hashat had prepared many more houses and shops to receive injured people, and the Cheshi were still actively hunting fugitives, while the Dorosef, as usual, were the first to distribute food and make sure everyone had a roof over their head. As they arrived at the entrance of a very busy Dorosef residence, she had a smile on her face. It was her first time being there, but aside from its size, the house was like many others in the Capital. There was light inside the large house, and already a lot happening on the patio. Large and tall silhouettes were running in and out, carrying big trays, and the strong aroma of beignet batter could be smelled from all the streets around. She could hear female voices asking for more fish to be brought, while children were running around and carrying little packages to deliver to every corner of the Capital. At the entrance, they spotted Kareen, already chatting with one of the leaders of the tribe, Nana in

between. Their grandmother was holding a fish beignet between her hands, intrigued.

“For you!”

Cessilia lowered her eyes to a little girl that was happily handing them fresh beignets too. The children were tasked with giving those to everyone who came to the residence. They thanked her, and took them, watching the young lady run back inside the house, probably to get more to hand out.

“...You have good citizens.”

Kassian’s words took them all by surprise. Ashen and Cessilia, who were standing side by side, and Tessa and Sabael on the other side, exchanged surprised looks, until the King nodded. Kassian was standing there, holding his beignet, just watching the crowd around them with a neutral expression.

“I know,” Ashen said finally, a smile crossing his lips.

“I talked a bit with Lady Bastat,” Kassian continued. “If we were able to reopen the commerce between our two countries, given the level of the Eastern Kingdom in some areas, it would definitely be profitable both to you and the Empire. We would need to discuss the specifics of reopening the borders gradually, of course, but in the long run... it would be nice.”

“I thought so too.”

Cessilia smiled, a bit happy. She hadn’t realized the future Emperor of the Dragon Empire and the current King of the Eastern Kingdom would reach an agreement so easily... but it was true that they had been friends for a while. Ashen hadn’t only been close to her during his time in the Empire.

“With our dragons, we could easily visit each other too,” smiled Cessilia.

“Speak for yourself,” scoffed Tessandra. “I’m in no hurry to go home where my mom can reach me... In fact, I think I’m planning to stay here for a while.”

She smiled at Sabael and hugged him, making him a bit embarrassed in front of her cousins. Cessilia chuckled.

“I don’t think we have to go home while Grandma is here,” she whispered in Ashen’s ear.

“...Then I need to make sure Lady Kareen stays a long while.”

He smiled back at her, and they exchanged a gentle kiss.

“Get a room!” Tessandra laughed.

“I’m still here,” groaned Kassian, glaring at her.

“Yeah, why? Shouldn’t you go back and check on Lady Bastat?”

Despite Tessandra’s obvious winks, the young Prince didn’t get flustered, and simply rolled his eyes. Without answering her teasing, he walked out, although it was only to go speak to their grandmother, Darsan, and the others.

“You shouldn’t tease Kassian,” Cessilia muttered.

“Oh my dragon, Cessi, you should thank me. This is our one chance to sneak away, come on!”

She grabbed Sabael and suddenly pulled him to run out of the Dorosef residence first. Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a glance but, after a mischievous smile, they both walked out as well.

Both couples split up without saying a word. Instead, the two cousins exchanged amused glances, before Tessandra grabbed Sabael’s collar to pull him into a narrow street. Cessilia chuckled, amused by her cousin’s antics. Meanwhile, Ashen, who had seen that too, put his arm around her with a faint smile.

“I know one guy that’s about to be eaten alive...” he whispered, amused.

“I don’t think he minds much.”

He nodded in agreement, and they walked away in a different direction, actually going up toward the castle. The two of them chose to take narrow streets as well, but mostly to avoid drawing attention. Cessilia did see a

couple of citizens notice their King amongst the people flocking the streets, but she and Ashen were already gone before any could decide to walk up to them. For a while, the two of them walked around without really any purpose. They were simply happy to walk quietly, an arm around each other, witnessing the scenes of Aestara beginning its recovery from the battle. Everywhere they went it was clear that, although it would take time, things would be rebuilt, people would heal and things would go back to normal. Perhaps life would even get much better. Cessilia had never seen so many people from different tribes helping each other but, for once, it truly felt as if the locals didn't care anymore about their differences.

"...Do you think Lady Kareen's here to take you back?" Ashen suddenly asked.

"It sounded more like Grandma plans to stay for a little while."

"Is it alright that we left her there? She already doesn't like me much, now I'm stealing you when she just arrived."

Cessilia chuckled, a bit amused.

"We left her with my brothers and Nana, I'm sure Grandma will be just fine. She most likely just came here because she was curious too. She seldom leaves her own palace... and it's not true that she doesn't like you."

"It did not sound like she did earlier."

"Grandma is the type to tease those she likes the most. Don't worry. She would already have me on the way back if she really didn't like me being with you."

Ashen sighed. That part was true, at least. In the few times he had met her before, it was obvious the Imperial Family's matriarch was quite hard to stop whenever she had decided on something. Still, he couldn't help but feel some uneasiness ever since Cessilia's brothers had showed up. He was worried they'd take her away from him. Surely, she couldn't stay in the Eastern Kingdom forever without ever going back to the Dragon

Empire. Even if he knew Cessilia had most likely already made up her mind, he wasn't ready to part with her, even if it was just for an hour...

Their steps naturally took them back to the castle. In fact, they were surprised to cross paths with even more Royal Guards, who had apparently decided to clear and clean the place as soon as possible. They walked up the stairs past the first gates, while many of the Yekara men they had killed earlier were brought out. Those who were injured could be taken and their wounds looked at, but they were handcuffed, and would most likely be kept under heavy watch. There were more dead bodies than people alive being taken out though. In fact, the castle was strangely empty when they arrived at the main doors, and ran into some of the higher-ranked Royal Guards. The men immediately put a knee down once they spotted the King, but no one stepped forward to talk to him. Instead, it was as if they had understood the King and his lady just needed some privacy.

Hence, the duo walked inside unbothered. Despite the destruction she had witnessed from above, Cessilia was surprised to see that the lower floors seemed fine. It would probably take a while before the castle was rebuilt to its former glory, but the damages weren't as bad as she had thought. Some windows had been shattered, and the whole place smelled of rain, but there was already little left of the violent fights they had gone through the last time they walked up those corridors. In fact, some servants were still busy cleaning the blood stains. It was as if everyone was in a hurry to clear all evidence of the rebellion. Not only that, but Cessilia guessed many were eager to show which side they had fought on too. Some of the men escorted by the Royal Guards wore the same uniform as them. It was strange to witness the whole scene when winners and losers looked so alike...

"Where should we go?" Ashen whispered against her ear.

A faint smile appeared on Cessilia's lips. She knew exactly where she wanted to go; They walked up the stairs, holding hands in the narrow corridors, Cessilia walking ahead with a hint of excitement when she found the familiar doors, still standing and completely fine; the floors

above were pretty unsafe to visit, but the Cerulean Suite had been spared by the violent dragon's attacks. This whole aisle of the castle had been spared somehow, perhaps because it was right above the sea. Most of the debris coming from above had probably fallen right into the sea without touching these parts... She pushed the doors, finding the room just as she had left it. It was cold, but dry. The wide balcony had done its work in keeping most of the rain outside and falling down to meld with the waves far below. The smell of salt and rain was embalming the whole room.

"I knew you'd like this place," Ashen smiled.

Cessilia turned around to face him, a smile on her lips. In fact, it felt strange to finally be here with Ashen, far enough from everything else that was going on in the Capital. From the Cerulean Suite, they couldn't hear anything but the gentle drip of the rain, and the waves crashing somewhere far below. Perhaps a dragon growl could be heard from afar from time to time too, but except for that, it was just the two of them, completely secluded from the world.

"I really do like it."

She slowly stepped back, pulling him toward the bed behind her; Ashen smiled, and followed her obediently. The two of them kept staring at each other lovingly, until Cessilia's legs hit the bed. Then, she turned around, and pushed the King to lay down first, which he did without resisting.

"This bed is comfier than I thought," he chuckled.

"It's quite large too," Cessilia said.

She took off his shoes, then hers, and climbed up on him, careful not to touch his injury. Ashen noticed, and sighed, gently putting his hands on her waist.

"I'm fine," he muttered.

"Stop saying that," she retorted.

“Cessilia, I received dragon blood and had a three-hour nap. I may not be as strong as a dragon’s daughter but I am not so fragile either. Can you leave me a bit of my pride as a man, please?”

“...Grandma says male pride is overrated,” she chuckled.

“I agree with that, but I still feel a bit bad that my Queen worked so hard to keep her useless King alive.”

“You did fine yourself.”

She leaned over and, before Ashen could protest, she gently kissed him.

It felt like their lips hadn’t met in forever. At least, not in a long while like this. The quick pecks and hurried kisses that they had stolen that day were nowhere near enough to satiate them. In fact, Ashen frowned a bit under her lips, suddenly wanting more of this. His hands were on her skin, and the more he touched, the more he could feel her silver scales in random places, testimonies of all the injuries she had received. He hated seeing her hurt, even if he knew she could withstand it. To think Cessilia’s soft skin had to toughen up until it got so rough was making him even more angry at those who had hurt her. He wished he had been in better health for the fight, and able to send it back ten fold. Still, she had proven time and time again that she was stronger than him.

Not only that, but he could feel the change wasn’t just physical. Cessilia was dominating him, more assertive with her lips, her hands, and the whole of her body. Despite the humid chill in the room, her body was anything but cold. In fact, the more they kept kissing, the hotter the atmosphere became around them. Neither of them could stop, it was as if a spell had taken over, making them relentlessly thirsty for the other’s taste. Ashen tried to sit up, putting an arm around her, but Cessilia suddenly pushed his chest with her hands.

“Stay down,” she muttered, out of breath.

He smiled, and slowly showed her he only wanted to get higher on the bed, so his head could rest against the pillows. Cessilia let him move, and repositioned herself to straddle his lap. With a wry smile on his lips, Ashen

took off the buckles of the last pieces of armor she was still wearing with dextrous fingers. Cessilia didn't move, looking as if she was quite unsure about this. He was glad they had already both been half undressed by the events, because his partner was quite reluctant to move at all...

"...Are you sure?" she muttered.

"I'm alright with staying like this," he smiled.

Cessilia knew he only meant their current position. The sexual tension that arose between them, and the slight cunning smile on his lips were dead giveaways of his real intentions. Not only that, but they now had very few pieces of clothing left... Cessilia sighed, still a bit worried. Her green eyes went down on her partner's body. His torso was wrapped in bandages but, indeed, he already seemed a lot better than he was just hours ago. Moreover, his hands caressing her hips were seriously making her feel hot, and desirable. His dark eyes on her were sending dangerous signals. She could already feel the heat rising between their lower abdomens, dangerously close to one another....

"...You stay put," she whispered, her voice a bit raspier than usual.

"Anything my Queen wants."

Cessilia felt embarrassed. Not because she was straddling him and clearly in control, but because all of her earlier resolve had flown out of the window with just one burning stare from her lover. She wanted him. She hadn't realized how much she wanted him until minutes ago. Perhaps because they hadn't had any intimate time in a while, she just felt desperate to have him, here and now. They were finally alone, and the excitement of the fight was dying down, while a more sensual feeling was rising. As if they needed something more primal to release all that pent up tension. It was crazy, exciting, and she felt a bit guilty too. Cessilia began to undo the last pieces of clothing on him, and the excitement rose up further, faster. She could feel the tension in him, and her body was responding all the same. It was even worse to have Ashen's eyes on her while she alone got rid of their clothes, and sat back up on his hips. She leaned over to kiss him, but now, most of the heat was coming from much

farther down, where she could feel his manhood caressing her inner thigh. One of Ashen's hands was around her nape, his fingers playing with her curls, while the other slid in between her legs. Cessilia gasped when he touched her, her whole body reacting like a sudden trigger. It was as if her own flesh had decided to be much more honest about its desires than she was. She could feel her insides twitching a bit, and the delicious waves of heat spreading from the places Ashen touched. His fingers were already quite unbearable. They rubbed, circled, caressed her entry without rest, making her breathe harder already. When he tried to lift his upper body a bit to get to her, she pushed him back down with her hand, and instead, leaned over. His lips were as restless as his fingers. Although Cessilia was on top, she was shamelessly indulging in his touch, her eyes closed and her whole body burning. She loved how he sucked on her breasts... He wasn't leaving any inch of her unblessed by his lips, and she could feel all her extremities liking this. Her fingers grabbed his white hair, with the need to hold on to something.

“Ashen...”

Her voice had never sounded sexier. He smiled, his lips gradually making their way back to hers, while he could feel his fingers already wet enough. Gently, he guided her to sit on him, the two of them groaning when their bodies finally merged. It felt almost liberating, as if their missing piece was back. Staying like this for a second, they chuckled and hugged before kissing once more, in a more demure way this time.

“...It feels so good,” he muttered. “I never want to be away from you again...”

She gently moved to kiss his forehead. She could understand his worries, but they were baseless- Cessilia had no intention of leaving. She had failed to follow him once already, and she wouldn't let it happen again. She was determined to stay true to her heart, no matter what, and guilt was no longer holding her back; She planned to stay here for good. With a smile on her lips, Cessilia interrupted their kiss and sat back on him. They interlaced their fingers, their gazes locked on one another, and she slowly began moving. She wasn't quite used to these sensations yet, but they felt

amazing already. It began with slow movements, her insides rubbing around him, sending delicious chills through both their bodies. She could see from Ashen's tortured expression how he was resisting the urge to move more... but Cessilia was determined to remain in charge. Her hand on his torso to keep him down, she moved unbearably slow, relishing in every single sensation she could get from their bodies. It felt amazing to be the one on top, dominating the ride, listening to her own body to guide her into those pleasures. Not only that, but Ashen's hands and gaze on her made her feel like a real queen. She could tell he barely held himself back, and the subtle movements of his hips couldn't compare to how much he really wanted to move. It came to her though. That desire to move faster, rub harder, feel hotter, and more, so much more.

“Ha...”

Cessilia accelerated, their breathing becoming faster, speeding up the lascivious ride and the movements of their bodies. The excitement was filling the room with heat, and she could hear their voices, their groans and moans becoming more animalistic. She liked it so much. Everything about this, even their tired bodies putting their last bits of strength into this. The lewd sounds of sex, and Ashen's expressions as she kept moving on him, taking more, up and down, squeezing and rubbing with pleasure, letting those sensations fill her. It was insane how natural sex felt when she was so inexperienced with it. But because it was Ashen, it was his body, his smell, his sweat, she loved everything about it. His dark eyes that accompanied her in her movements, and the way he kept staring, as obsessed with her as she was with him. He made expressions he only made with her, and his movements were never so clumsy and raw as they were when he was trying to caress her whole body. His groans of pleasure got louder, and his hands were pressing her to move faster on him, his hips trying to keep up and trembling every time she pounded against him. Cessilia could feel that urge coming too. The rubbing inside was driving her crazy, and she kept moving, craving more of those sensations, while a bigger wave was definitely coming from deeper under, making her anticipate that big release she wanted. Ashen grabbed her hips and kept

pounding, gasping, unable to stay still any longer. It was now a wild battle between their bodies, neither of them willing to lose, win, or stop.

It hit Cessilia first. A violent burst in her lower stomach, making her cry out in relief, almost out of air. Ashen kept pounding, until her squeezing around him triggered his own release just seconds later, with another long groan. The two of them breathed loudly, a bit out of it, just trying to calm down with their trembling bodies. Cessilia could still feel that strange sensation inside, making her not want to move, yet unable to stay still. Ashen's hands took her out of her daze a bit. He gently caressed her cheek, and she found the strength to move, letting him out and slowly falling next to him on the bed. He chuckled, and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer to kiss her forehead.

"...I could get used to this," he chuckled, still a bit out of breath.

Cessilia pouted a bit, knowing he was teasing her. Still, she felt strangely good, and had finally calmed down. She had enjoyed it, although it was brief. She had put her last bits of strength into this, and now, she could finally rest, wrapped in his arms, Ashen's smell surrounding her. In fact, she didn't have any strength left to move, and happily stayed right there, closing her eyes and putting her cheek against his shoulder.

She felt Ashen pull the blanket over them, and fell asleep with his breathing soothing her.