

Chapter 31

A bright ray of light woke her up. Cessilia frowned, bothered by the sudden brightness, and struggled to open an eye. Right above Ashen's shoulder, the dawning sunlight was reflected on some shiny, ice-like scales. She smiled. Cece was patiently waiting, those gorgeous ruby eyes riveted on them. Everything in the room was incredibly silent, which was impressive considering the size of the dragon waiting for her. Cessilia could only hear the calm waves, the gentle breeze, and even some brave seagulls farther away.

She turned her eyes to the man lying next to her. Ashen was still deep asleep, a little frown on his face. His long white hair was all over his face and shoulders, a bit messy. She regretted that they hadn't bathed before falling asleep. There was still dried blood on his hairline, and the sheets were quite dirty... Still, everything felt warm and comfortable around her. She had slept tightly wrapped in his arms, against his dark and warm skin. She glanced over the injuries she could see from there. Most were already drying and healing, soon to be thin scars. Cessilia grazed them with the tips of her fingers, feeling a bit sad. Ashen's body was already covered in so many scars... He didn't even react to her touch, his breathing slow and steady. He ought to be quite exhausted. She carefully raised her fingertips to caress that frown between his eyes until it disappeared and his expression relaxed. Truth was, she didn't really want to leave his embrace, but there was somebody else she had missed a lot.

Careful not to wake him up, Cessilia slipped out of the bed. Giving a quick smile to Cece, she moved to the nearby basin for a quick wash. Ashen wasn't the only one smelling a bit nasty... The cold water felt good on her skin and on her scales. Cessilia was surprised to spot some of them were still there. Once she was done cleaning them, they looked even shinier. Unlike Kian's scales that were of a metal-gray silver, hers and Cece's were

more of a subtle blue-ish shade, just like ice. Once clean, Cessilia walked to the wardrobe to find a new dress. Her previous one had been half torn away, and the remains were scattered on the floor around the bed... She found one she liked, a gorgeous dark purple one without too many embellishments, but that fit her well, long and off-the-shoulder. Cessilia realized she was probably going to cover her neck a lot less now. Her hair was a bit of a mess, but she combed it quickly with her fingers, and braided it as best as she could, figuring she'd ask for Tessa's or Nana's help later.

Then, she finally walked up to the balcony where Cece was patiently waiting for her.

The gorgeous dragon growled very softly when Cessilia approached. They were excited to see each other, although both were careful not to wake Ashen up. Cessilia put her hand forward, her fingers finding the cold, smooth scales of Cece's snout first. Her dragon nudged gently against her palm, closing its ruby eyes with what almost seemed like relief. Cessilia's heart felt warm too. They hadn't had enough time to properly reunite. Of course, they didn't really need physical closeness to feel each other's presence, but she still loved every moment they could spend together. Gently, she climbed on her dragon, and Cece moved down, climbing down the balcony in just a few swift movements. The take off was incredibly smooth. Cece had always had this elegance, rare and impressive for a dragon, with movements as swift as the wind. Cessilia enjoyed the ride as her dragon slithered away from the castle, climbing up for a morning flight. For once, the Eastern Kingdom was blessed with a cloud-free sky, the morning sun shining brightly on the horizon. From their height, they could see the gorgeous colors of the sunrise in shades of warm purple, blushing pink, and vibrant orange melting one into the other like waves. As Cece simply flew around without any precise destination, Cessilia looked down on Aestara. The Capital was very quiet this morning. All the smoke from the fires was gone, replaced by a morning mist that came from the docks and wrapped the city in a mysterious, thin fog. Everyone who had worked hard to put out the fires and rescue the injured were now quietly resting in their own homes. There were still signs of the battle in the destroyed buildings, wrecked streets, and the few piles of bodies that

had been respectfully covered until something better could be done, but at long last, peace was reigning. Cessilia enjoyed her privileged tour of the Capital on Cece's back. In fact, she was just happy being able to ride the skies on her own dragon. Cece was moving slowly, the powerful wings taking them higher or lower in just a couple of flaps. The Silver Dragon only had to keep them extended to casually float on the morning winds, following the natural streams and lazily flying around.

Another dragon's growl got their attention. They turned their heads, and spotted Kian happily flying right behind them. The dragon was alone, but visibly enjoying that morning flight with its sibling. Cessilia almost regretted that Dran and the other dragons weren't here to fly with her Cece. The young dragons had all been the closest since each one was born... Cece had barely even known Seus, the youngest. Their baby brother was born when Cessilia was twelve, hence Cece had barely got to spend any time with his dragon... Cessilia forced herself to take a deep breath and calm down. At the very least, Cece was back. Now, they would have all the time they wanted to catch up, and do all those things that she had missed having her dragon for over the years. First, this. Yes, something as simple as a morning flight at dawn was a very good start. Cessilia promised herself they'd do this as often as possible, here or in the Dragon Empire.

Cece let out one of those unique long screams, echoing in the skies around them, putting a smile on Cessilia's lips. For a while, the trio enjoyed this time together, both dragons playing and fooling around, even racing against each other at times. Although Cessilia had been allowed to ride her brothers' or father's dragons when needed, nothing could compare to flying on her own. She could anticipate each of Cece's movements, and each twist and turn felt as natural as if she had moved one of her own limbs.

"...Cece," she whispered after a while.

The dragon happily growled back, and parted ways with Kian, flying back toward the castle. But Cece didn't head back toward the Cerulean Suite. Instead, the Silver Dragon flew to one of the other flanks of the castle's

island, toward one too familiar beach. Landing softly on the sand, both Cessilia and her dragon looked around. The waves had already washed away all traces of the fight they had held there the previous day. In fact, only Jinn remained. The Red Dragon was still there, trapped in the ice, but asleep from exhaustion. Cessilia paid it no attention for now. Although it had melted a bit, the ice was still keeping Jinn captive, so there was no risk.

She turned around, facing Cece once again, on the ground this time. Her dragon's long body was extended behind it, but the head was right in front of Cessilia, those big ruby eyes fixated on her. Cessilia took a deep breath and walked up closer, offering her hands.

"...Good morning," she muttered.

Cece growled softly in response. Cessilia stepped even closer, until she and her dragon were just an inch away from each other. Then, she caressed the silver-scaled snout with her hands and leaned her forehead gently against her dragon's. Both of them closed their eyes together.

The relief and gratitude in her heart was beyond any words. Cessilia just felt so blessed to have her dragon back, her Cece right here. It still felt unreal, despite the dragon's large presence. She had this urge to touch the silver scales non-stop, as if she feared it would all disappear at any moment. But Cece was here to stay, and it was almost as if they had never been apart. It was strange, considering how long they had been separated, and how much both of them had changed, but it was true. They felt closer than ever, their hearts beating as one. It was as if she was facing her own reflection, her heart and soul taking the appearance of a mythical creature. Cessilia wasn't sure if her heart was really as strong as Cece seemed to be, but she definitely felt like she had taken a leap forward, and she would never go back to her former shell. She felt strong, fierce, confident, and even a bit proud. If anything, she felt at peace with her past. Those burdens and dark shadows from the past weren't weighing on her shoulders anymore. That tight feeling down in her throat was gone... for good.

Suddenly, Cece gave her a little head bump, making Cessilia fall back.

“Hey!”

But her dragon lowered its head, tilting it with its lower rear moving around, moving around playfully. Cessilia’s lips opened in a smile, and she rolled on the sand, running to the waves until she could splash Cece. The dragon happily jumped into the fresh seawater with her, fooling around and teasing Cessilia. Obviously, Cece was much bigger than her, and capable of sending her flying, but was careful not to. In fact, the dragon was just like a large dog wary of its owner, pushing Cessilia around with its snout and taunting her to keep playing around; Cessilia wasn’t sparing her efforts, sprinkling Cece as much as she could, and diving underwater to play tag with the dragon too. For a while, the two of them played as if they were twelve again, ignoring everything around, laughing and growling in happiness, having fun with the simplest things.

When they both grew tired of their game, they laid on the sand, Cece’s large body making a nice seat for Cessilia to rest her back against. The Princess let out a long, tired, but satisfied sigh. They sat facing the rising sun, using its gentle rays of light to dry themselves. Cessilia was glad she could endure the cold water, as most normal humans would have gotten sick from playing in the chilly water. Cece too seemed happy to simply lay around and dry. The ruby eyes were already closed, preparing to nap in the comfy bed of sand.

“Good morning, my darling.”

Cessilia opened her eyes, surprised to hear her grandmother’s voice. She looked to her right, where the old lady was just climbing off of Krai’s back. The Black Dragon immediately jumped to play around with Cece, and before she could even get up, Cessilia was pushed in the sand by the two dragons’ unruly playing. Unlike with her, Cece didn’t have to show restraint while playing with Krai, and soon enough, the whole beach became a huge playfield for these two. Despite the age difference, dragons remained dragons, and played all the same. In fact, Cece being a bit bigger than the Black Dragon made it even funnier when they began to chase each other, as poor Krai had to run twice as fast to escape. Cessilia

chuckled watching them, and walked up to her grandmother while being cautious of their playing.

“You’re up early, Grandmother.”

“Of course! I’ve woken up with the sunrise every day since I was born. Old ladies don’t need that much sleep, either.”

“You’re not old...”

With an amused smile, Cessilia wrapped her arms around her grandmother, hugging her. She had been a bit embarrassed the previous day, but now, she was happy to have some time alone with Kareen. The older lady hugged her back, but soon she frowned, and looked at Cessilia’s hair with an upset expression.

“What in the world is this?” she exclaimed.

She was holding some of Cessilia’s sharply cut hair, the strands she had to cut the previous day, during the fight... Cessilia grimaced.

“Collateral damage,” she muttered.

“Ha! As if I was going to leave you like this. Come over here.”

Cessilia didn’t even think about asking or protesting, she trusted her grandmother wholly. Lady Kareen made her sit on the beach, and began rinsing her hair with sea water, clearly determined to clean it and cut it herself. She had taken out a small dagger too. Because she was turning her back to the sea, Cessilia had Jinn in her direct line of vision. The Red Dragon had woken up but, intimidated by the two others present on the beach, it didn’t dare make a sound, staying still with a sad expression.

“...Grandmother. You said dragons without owners can... survive, right?”

“Yes. I’ve raised a few myself. When your uncles were murdered, I had to raise their dragons on my own. The last one passed away just a couple of years after you were born, you wouldn’t remember it.”

“This dragon... It belonged to a boy that died a long time ago. It survived by staying with his sister, but now, that woman... she is gone too.”

Cessilia glanced to the side. She wasn't surprised that Jisel's body was gone. It had been taken away by the tide... probably.

"Well, it probably won't live much longer," Kareen said, still busy cleaning and combing her hair. "That brat looks quite big already for one that lost its owner."

"...I feel sorry for him," Cessilia muttered. "I wish I didn't have to... make it so he was alone again."

"Was the woman good to that dragon?"

"I'm not sure. She wasn't a good person, but... in my heart, I know she wasn't completely bad either."

She felt that dread in her heart, as if she couldn't find real closure about this. In fact, she was almost grateful that Jisel's body was gone. She was almost sure that the woman was dead, but... she wasn't mad about thinking there was a very, very slim possibility she had survived too.

"No one is either completely good or bad, Cessilia. Humans are too complex for that. Even the kindest soul can feel resentment, and even the worst can feel remorse."

"That woman went through a lot. Things that made her... make terrible choices. I can't help but think..."

"Her circumstances made her the evil woman she became?" her grandmother guessed.

Cessilia nodded slightly.

A few seconds passed, and her eyes went back to the Red Dragon stuck in ice. Jinn's eyes were on the seashore, as if they were looking for something, or someone. She could almost read the dragon's heartache, the questions in those big, sad eyes. Kareen began cutting her hair, carefully using her blade to even it out.

"To each person their own choices, Cessilia," she said. "If the woman refused to be saved or changed, that was her own decision. Long before you were born, the Imperial Palace was cut-throat, the most dangerous

place in the Empire, yet many people still lived there. They chose power over security, and often paid for it with their lives. I had to make choices too, some I might regret at the end of my days. However, I won't blame it on anybody else, they are my own. Your father chose to go to war and killed many soldiers. Those deaths aren't his responsibility, though. They were foolish to partake in a war they were bound to lose. If you carry other people's burdens on top of your own, a day will come when you won't be able to step forward anymore, my darling."

She put the blade aside, gently combing the freshly cut hair, done and satisfied. Kareen moved to help her granddaughter stand up again. Now facing each other, they held hands. Cessilia found incredible comfort in simply facing her grandmother like this. Kareen had always been one of the women she looked up to the most, and even now that she had caught up to her height, she still felt as small as she was as a child when facing her. The older woman smiled, and caressed her granddaughter's cheek.

"You have your mother's gentle nature," she said. "That's why you still have way too much empathy for others. Did you offer the woman a chance to redeem herself?"

"...I believe I did."

"Then her demise was her choice and her fate," nodded Kareen. "You cannot save everyone, Cessilia. If you offer someone a choice, and they take the wrong one, no matter how sorry you feel for them, you have to let go. Their burden won't get any lighter because you chose to carry it too. There is no point."

Cessilia slowly nodded. She understood her grandmother's words, but in her heart, she knew there would still be a bit of that guilt she would carry for a little while longer. Still, Kareen smiling at her made her feel as if everything would be alright. She nodded, and as her grandmother opened her arms, she happily indulged in hugging her.

"Oh well, I've done what I could with your hair, but you could use a proper bath!"

"I will," Cessilia chuckled, stepping back.

As they separated, her eyes fell on Jinn once again. This time, the Red Dragon was staring at the rowdy duo playing not far from the ice rock it was still trapped in. When Cece inadvertently ran too close, Jinn suddenly growled, but Krai immediately growled back, even louder, scaring the Red Dragon into submission.

“...What should we do with him?” Cessilia asked her grandmother. “I feel bad, we can’t just leave him in the ice until he dies...”

Kareen sighed and crossed her arms. She walked up to the Red Dragon, now circled by Cece and Krai who seemed to be ganging up and growling back at it. For a while, it was a concert of dragon growls until the two women walked into the midst of it.

“Enough!”

One word from Kareen, and all three of them stopped. Krai tilted its head, while Cece’s snout shyly nudged Lady Kareen’s elbow. The older lady gently caressed the silver scales, but her dark eyes were riveted on Jinn. Funny enough, the Red Dragon seemed even more intimidated by that woman than it was by the other two dragons. Its eyes kept trying to look away, as if pretending to ignore her intense stare.

“...I suppose I could take this brat with me,” she finally said. “It’s not the first time I’d raise a dragon that isn’t of my own blood...”

Cessilia nodded, happy with this resolution. Indeed, Lady Kareen was incredibly good at taming dragons, for someone that didn’t have her own... Cessilia had seen her with her uncles’ dragons, and all of them were as good as obedient puppies in front of her.

“Krai, baby, free this one for me,” she said, “and you.”

She suddenly pointed her long index finger at Jinn, the Red Dragon immediately freezing up.

“You better behave,” she simply said.

Then, she just turned around and walked away very calmly. Cessilia exchanged a glance with Cece.

“I know,” she chuckled. “Grandmother is the best, isn’t she?”

“Ashen?”

Cessilia gently woke him up. The King groaned, opening one eye slowly. Upon recognizing his lover leaning over him, he smiled and extended his arms, grabbing and pulling Cessilia onto the bed with him before she could resist. She let out a little gasp of surprise, but fell over him with an amused chuckle.

“Good morning,” he smiled, kissing her cheek.

“G-good morning,” Cessilia answered, blushing. “Ashen, you shouldn’t...”

Her resistance was an adorable tease. He kept hugging her, amused, keeping his eyes closed and imagining her embarrassed self, although he wasn’t quite sure why she seemed so shy that morning. He kissed her forehead, but Cessilia put her hands on his torso, and sat on the bed.

“Ashen,” she muttered.

“Hm?”

He opened his eyes, and finally spotted the third person’s tall figure, standing at the end of their bed.

Ashen jumped, sitting straight up in the bed, completely panicked. He had sat up so fast, he felt the injuries both in his back and on his torso painfully stirring in protest. Still, he wouldn’t have dared to lie back down. Lady Kareen was standing right there, in person, facing him with her arms crossed and a haughty expression on. Her dark eyes went down, and Ashen followed her gaze, immediately realizing he was naked. He quickly pulled the blanket over his lower half.

“...Morning, Lady Kareen.”

“Happy to see you too, young man.”

Ashen grimaced, and glanced toward Cessilia, who had a sorry expression on.

“I tried to tell you,” she muttered.

He could easily guess she hadn't been given much choice. Lady Kareen was a woman who did not take refusals well... Embarrassed, he tried to comb his hair out of his face, and gather as much dignity as he could. Next to him, Cessilia was seated on the bed too, an amused smile on her lips.

“As much as I appreciate the view, you should get dressed, young man. I'll take brunch outside.”

She then walked to the balcony of the suite, and simply sat on one of the chairs there as if the whole place was hers. Ashen let out a long sigh, and fell back on the bed, rubbing his eyes.

“Really sorry...”

“I forgot how unpredictable that woman could be,” he whispered back. “Anyways... I'll get dressed.”

“I'll go try and find us something to eat,” chuckled Cessilia.

Luckily, the triplets had left some food in the Cerulean Suite beforehand. Mostly fresh and dried fruits, biscuits, some tea, and Cessilia managed to find some jam too. Ashen also left quickly to go and find some pants, and most surprisingly, came back with some bread, eggs and dried meat.

“I live here, I know where the kitchens are,” he chuckled at Cessilia's surprised expression.

In record time, they had managed to gather a half-decent breakfast for the demanding older lady, and place it on the balcony's table before sitting down with her. Ashen's nervousness was written all over his face and, amusingly, he was alternating between avoiding Lady Kareen's eyes and staring at her. Cessilia couldn't help but smile behind her cup of tea. She rarely got to see him so tense and intimidated by someone... However, for a while, Lady Kareen didn't say anything. She only drank and ate quietly, graceful as always, very slowly as if she was truly taking her time with the delicacies. For a long while, no one said a thing, until Cessilia put down her cup.

“Did you have a good evening, Grandmother?”

“Oh, I did. That Dorosef girl is incredibly smart and a great entertainer. I learned a lot more from just a few minutes with her than a whole hour with some older man that kept harassing me. She’s a great match for your brother too. I hope they settle down quickly, Darsan needs a kind girl like her to tame him.”

“Right?” Cessilia smiled. “Naptunie became our friend right away, she’s incredible. And very brave too.”

“Her whole tribe is pretty interesting. They offered for me to stay with them, and I might just take them up on their offer. This place you call a castle is no good! There is not enough light, the stone work is terrible, and those long corridors make no sense!”

Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a surprised look, and not because of Kareen’s appraisal of the poor castle.

“Grandmother, you plan to stay here? For how long?”

“As long as it pleases me!” she retorted. “Why not? I’m bored in the Empire, so I might as well take a vacation here. Unless I’m not welcome?”

She asked that last sentence while staring at Ashen, her thin eyebrows dramatically arched. He smiled nervously.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you wish, Lady Kareen,” he said. “I’m just surprised you wish to stay. It will take us weeks to renovate the Capital and clean up the aftermath of the battle...”

“Darling, I’ve seen way worse than this. In fact, if you plan on having my darling granddaughter and at least one of my grandbabies staying here, I have a few things to say about how you should renovate this pigsty you call a castle; even my stables get more light than this!”

Ashen nodded helplessly. Cessilia couldn’t help but be a bit happy about her grandmother staying for a while. Lady Kareen was an incredible support, and if she planned to stay, she would definitely whip the staff into

shape and get the Capital back to its former glory in half as much time as it should take!

“...At least this room is decent,” she nodded.

“I gave Cessilia the best suite in the castle.”

“That’s good.”

It almost felt like he was trying to get his in-laws’ approval already. However, Lady Kareen liked to stay an enigmatic woman, sipping her tea with very little expression on.

“Grandmother, you saw Father and Mother then?” Cessilia asked. “Are they alright?”

“Almost half their children crossed the border and didn’t bother to send any news!” Kareen exclaimed. “Of course they are worried! Oh well, it’s not like they don’t trust you. You know that silly father of yours would have come in person if his presence wasn’t needed in the north... With Kassian and Darsan both gone from their positions, it must be chaos up there, and your mother’s got the younger ones to look after. Moreover, we wouldn’t want to cause a diplomatic incident.”

“We plan to reopen the border very soon,” declared Ashen. “I will reopen the negotiations with the Empress as soon as possible—”

“Fine!”

She suddenly slammed her cup down.

“I will make sure those negotiations go well,” Kareen suddenly declared, “and I want to have a residence built in the outskirts of the city for when I come to visit, at least twice a year. A nice location, not too far from the Capital, with gardens, and plenty of light.”

Cessilia almost spat her tea out. So that was her grandmother’s real aim after all... to house-hunt and find herself a secondary residence far from the Imperial Palace. She remembered the epic fights between Lady Kareen and her daughter, constantly arguing about her being under

surveillance. No wonder she found going on the other side of the border would be the best way to flee from her daughter!

“Of course, I should have a room here as well,” she added, grabbing a new fruit. “A suite akin to this one in terms of size and decorations would be acceptable.”

“Grandmother, the repairs are going to take a while...”

“So what?! Am I not welcome until then?” she protested.

“You can’t impose on the Dorosef Tribe for so long,” muttered Cessilia. “Moreover, all the families are going to be busy repairing what was destroyed in the battle, too... How about you stay with us instead?”

“With us?” she repeated, frowning.

Her eyes then turned to Ashen with a serious expression.

“Young man. Do I understand that you plan on having my precious granddaughter remain here?”

“Of course,” Ashen retorted. “I have no intention of parting with Cessilia again.”

“Really? I heard she came to marry you, so why haven’t I heard of any wedding happening yet? You wouldn’t possibly be thinking of keeping the War God’s precious daughter, the Dragon Empress’ niece, and the sister of the future Emperor as a mere concubine, would you?”

“Grandmother!” Cessilia blushed.

However, neither Ashen nor Kareen reacted to her. Instead, the two of them were fiercely staring at each other, the older lady with a smirk on her lips. She was obviously testing the King, and he was not having it.

“No,” he muttered, anger in his voice.

“...Cessilia dear, leave us alone.”

“What? But—”

“Go and find Tessandra, that child drank way more than she should have last night.”

Cessilia wanted to protest some more. The atmosphere between these two did not seem like the conversation about to ensue was going to be pacific at all. In fact, her grandmother asking her to leave made her even more nervous about all this. They wouldn't fight each other or something, right?

“...Don't worry, Cessilia,” muttered Ashen, his eyes riveted on the older lady. “I'll come and find you later, I promise.”

This was his own way of saying he could handle the matriarch of the Imperial Family on his own. Cessilia glanced at the two of them and slowly stood up, still quite nervous about leaving the table.

“Grandmother, please be nice,” she muttered.

“Always, darling, always.”

Cessilia sighed, but left a quick kiss on her grandmother's cheek, and after one last glance at Ashen, she walked back inside, quickly grabbing a thicker shawl to cover herself with, and left the Cerulean Suite.

She couldn't help but still be nervous while she went down the stairs. Her grandmother was probably here to play the role of proxy in her father's stead, which was even more terrifying... It made sense that the War God couldn't have come himself. Ashen's relationship with her family hadn't been left in the best state, but also the current geopolitical conflict between the two nations went far beyond the King's wishes. Merely reopening the borders for trade would take weeks, if not months, and it would take far more than that for the trust to be reestablished between the two countries. While she kept walking down the castle's stairs and corridors, Cessilia tried to imagine it. In a few years' time, would the two nations find a common ground? Her brother was going to become the Dragon Emperor some day, probably in just a few years. If she became Ashen's Queen, wouldn't that make it all far easier? Although her heart was hopeful, Cessilia was also educated enough in politics to know not everything would happen soon. She now knew why her grandmother had come, instead of her father or aunt...

Walking down and outside the castle, into the fresh morning fog, Cessilia realized the damage done to the castle was worse than everywhere else, which was a rather good thing... Aside from the main streets, most buildings had held well against the attacks. Many doors and windows would have to be repaired, but the stone walls of the houses had remained sturdy. Where the fires had taken place, everything but the houses' structures had gone up in flames. Which meant there was still something to rebuild on... unlike the collapsed parts of the castle. Cessilia glanced back. She had never really liked this castle, except for the Cerulean Suite. Maybe her grandmother was right, and they could rebuild something even better?

“Cessi!”

She turned around, surprised, and found Darsan running up to her. She would have been scared of her older brother's giant figure if she wasn't used to it. He hugged her like a gigantic bear would have, with his big arms circling her.

“Good morning, little sis!”

“Good morning,” she chuckled. “What are you doing here?”

“I was looking for Grandma, she wasn't in the room Nana gave her...”

“Oh, I just had breakfast with her, she's... chatting with Ashen.”

“Oh! It's all good then. Come on, Nana's sisters are making us a crazy amazing breakfast! Did you know her uncles go to fish before dawn every morning? I heard them waking up this morning and followed them, it was so much fun catching fish!”

Cessilia chuckled. She could see Darsan having fun amongst the fishermen, happy to use his strength for something other than fighting and repairing his mistakes... Grabbing her hand, he took her back to the Dorosef residence. Despite the early hour, it was already quite noisy inside, as expected. The tribe was obviously used to having guests, and right as she stepped in the courtyard, Cessilia was blessed with the delicious and now familiar smell of fresh fish beignets.

“Cessi!”

Tessandra appeared, her mouth stuffed with half a beignet, the other half she offered Cessilia, who happily took it.

“You look tired,” chuckled Cessilia.

“I didn’t sleep much,” her cousin winked at her, “but that was one of the best nights of my life, until that big idiot of your brother decided to make the worst ruckus possible and wake everyone up in the damn house...”

“What, I was getting ready to go fishing!” protested Darsan.

“Your dragon butt face probably scared all the fish away,” groaned Tessandra, still bitter about the rude awakening.

“You dragon poop,” retorted Darsan.

“Dragon fart.”

“Dragon boog—”

“Oh, can you two stop?” Naptunie sighed, appearing behind Tessandra.

“That’s really disgusting and I just had breakfast too...”

“Morning, Nana.”

“Good morning! We have more beignets if you want! Although you might have to wait a bit, I think we’re going to distribute them downtown...”

“That’s nice, but I already had breakfast with Grandmother.”

“Oh, is she alright? Lady Kareen really drank a lot last night...”

“Trust me, Grandmother is a heavyweight,” sighed Tessandra. “She’s fine. ...Is she around?”

“She’s with Ashen,” explained Cessilia.

“With the King? Why?”

Cessilia shrugged. She wasn’t quite sure either, and although she did have her suspicions, she didn’t really want to imagine what they could be

discussing at the moment. She'd probably hear about it all later... Tessandra grinned, but didn't say a word.

"Well, what's the plan for today, Nana? I am not handing out fish beignets all day again, I'm warning you."

"Actually, I think we should go back and help with cleaning the streets," sighed Nana. "Food isn't really an issue, but I heard some streets are still blocked and a lot of people remain homeless and had to sleep at neighbors' last night..."

"I don't mind working for free," said Tessandra, "but I doubt the neighborhood is going to remain so selfless for long. People were already struggling before the battle, it's going to be even worse now. And two of the four bridges were destroyed too, it's going to cause a big issue with the trading in and out of the Capital... we're bound to have even more clogging than before."

Suddenly, an idea came to Cessilia's mind. Her green eyes went toward the destroyed parts of the castle, then to the Capital's outskirts. Perhaps this battle was actually going to be the solution they had been waiting for to get the country going again...

"Tessa, can you and Darsan go ahead? I have an idea I need to discuss with Lady Bastat and Nana."

Her cousin nodded without asking for another explanation. Tessandra knew Cessilia enough to figure that if she didn't ask her to stay back, she didn't need to. Moreover, she had regained her full strength now.

"See you later, Nana!" Darsan happily waved, before leaving behind Tessandra.

Cessilia chuckled, and turned to Nana, who got even redder, caught waving back.

"Do you like my brother?" she asked.

"W-well, Sir Darsan is really quite nice..."

"He is," Cessilia nodded, without teasing her any further.

“What did you want to talk to me and Lady Bastat about?”

“Do you know where we can find her first?”

Nana nodded, and guided her outside, just a couple of streets away. There, Bastat was busy chatting with another man from her tribe, arguing about some fabric she had in her hands. When she spotted Cessilia and Nana coming toward her, she frowned, and dismissed him with a sigh.

“Everything alright?” Cessilia asked.

“I wish my father was here,” murmured Bastat. “My tribe is a bit restless with everything going on, and they have a hard time relying on me so fast... but I can’t bother you with that. Is there anything you need?”

Nana turned to Cessilia, a bit curious to know as well. The Princess took a deep breath, and nodded.

“I think we need to build a city,” she said.

The two young women exchanged a glance, confused.

“A city? How so...? Aren’t we supposed to rebuild the Capital first?”

“I think we need to rebuild the Capital and build a new city at the same time,” said Cessilia. “This morning, I had breakfast with my grandmother, and she gave me an idea. She wants to build herself a palace here.”

“A palace?” exclaimed Nana, shocked.

“Yes, but there is literally no space left in the Capital to build more, right? So, Grandmother will have to build her secondary residence outside, farther than the Outer Capital. ...What if we used this opportunity to create a new city?”

“But, building a whole city will require a lot of funds,” muttered Bastat, “and workers...”

“If we provide jobs, people will come,” said Cessilia, confident. “My grandmother has a lot of money, she could pay forward for her residence, so the workers would be able to be paid for building it! But what if we applied this to a whole city? We can create jobs and get people to settle.

It would reduce the traffic into the Capital and provide new opportunities to everyone who was trying to get there!”

“...That would be great,” muttered Nana, “but how... I mean, where will we find that amount of money to build an entire city?”

“Even with requesting the cost for the repairs and damages be paid by the Yekara, I doubt that will be enough,” nodded Bastat.

“My grandmother can easily pay forward for her palace,” said Cessilia. “What if we asked the Dragon Empire, my aunt the Empress, to lend the money for the new city?”

“You want the Kingdom to take out a loan?!”

“We are going to reestablish trade between the two countries,” smiled Cessilia. “What better way to reopen communications than a mutually beneficial deal between them?”

Nana’s jaw dropped.

“That’s...” sighed Lady Bastat. “I can see your goal, but would that really work? I mean, for a deal to be mutually beneficial, we need to give something to the Dragon Empire, what could that be?”

“The Dragon Empire’s capital is starting to have an overpopulation issue,” explained Cessilia. “Not only that, but there are many crafts and domains which haven’t evolved in a long time as well. Reopening trade between the two nations would be a big opportunity for the Dragon Empire to improve its own economy. Many merchants and artisans could move between the two nations. Moreover, that loan isn’t much for the Dragon Empire, but if the Eastern Kingdom caught up in terms of economy...”

“It would spare them a future financial crisis,” nodded Naptunie. “In the past, there were many cases in which the Empire or the Kingdom’s economy was improved simply by introducing new trades. Moreover, an economy doing too well for too long isn’t good either, it creates stagnation which is bound to collapse at the first crisis!”

“...As educated as I am in trade,” muttered Bastat, “I’m afraid I don’t follow...”

“It’s like two pots of water,” explained Nana. “If water keeps being poured into only one, it will eventually overflow. But if instead, that pot shares the water it receives into another pot, an empty one, it will last longer before it overflows!”

“That sounds awfully simple, but I understand what you mean, I think...”

“The idea is simply to use that loan,” said Cessilia. “This way, the Dragon Empire gets new opportunities of trade and for our commerce to get to a new era, sharing both countries’ knowledge, while the Eastern Kingdom gets back on its feet. If the two nations are bound to trade, it is even better if they can do so on an equal footing. Moreover, if the Eastern Kingdom accelerates its growth, we will reduce the issues at the border, and the whole Kingdom will flourish and be on par with the Dragon Empire even sooner.”

“Now that sounds great,” nodded Lady Bastat, “but how do we guarantee the idea will please the Empress? We’re talking about a huge loan...”

“That’s why I think we should come up with the best artisans to convince her... the best merchants and the brightest minds.”

Cessilia smiled, and the two young women suddenly understood.

“You want us to represent the Kingdom!” exclaimed Nana.

“Nana, you’re the smartest person I have ever met,” smiled Cessilia. “You should become a Royal Advisor, not just stay hidden in a library... and you, Lady Bastat, have incredible talent for trade as well. I have no doubt you can pick the finest merchants and create a Merchant’s Guild that could rival that of the Dragon Empire!”

“...Will His Majesty agree to this?” frowned Bastat.

“I think it might be the best way to rebuild the Council of the Lords,” she nodded. “The Lords will have to change, and instead, we need to find ways to represent everyone in the Kingdom, not just the strongest clans or

tribes. This should start with every trade, every line of work being represented.”

“I like the sound of that,” nodded Nana. “I’m sure I can convince Uncle Mino and the Dorosef Tribe Leader!”

“I’ll need to discuss it with our merchants and artisans,” said Bastat, “but I have high hopes, too...”

Cessilia chuckled, pleased to see the two capable young women agree to her plan.

“We still have time,” she said. “For now, the repairs and sorting out the aftermath of the battlefield will probably take us quite a while, but I think the castle and the outskirts will both need to be rebuilt next, and by capable architects... I’m sure you two already know names of people who could help with that. Can I ask you to get a headstart on this? Then we can put our plan in motion as soon as this battle is really behind us.”

The two young women nodded immediately, and Naptunie’s eyes were literally shining with excitement. Cessilia knew those two would be more than capable and up to the task.

“Alright then, I will go and meet with the Cheshi Clan, see how we’re doing for now,” she smiled.

“Oh, Lady Aglithia was also looking for you,” said Nana. “I think it’s about the prisoners...”

“I’ll go and see her then. Thanks for the beignets, Nana!”

“Always!” the young girl chuckled.

The three of them parted ways, Nana and Bastat heading downtown in the same direction Tessandra and Darsan had taken before. Meanwhile, Cessilia turned around, heading to the Cheshi’s main residence to find Aglithia.

“Cessilia.”

She turned around, surprised to see her older brother appearing. Not only that, but Kassian was wearing a thicker coat too, looking ready for a

journey. Cessilia walked up to him, curious. He hugged her quietly as a greeting, and she could smell he had been given some of the delicious Dorosef signature breakfast.

“Good morning, big brother. ...What’s going on?”

“I’m going to fly home this morning.”

“What? ...Already?”

He chuckled and nodded, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“You’ve been gone for a while already, and our parents probably need to hear you’re alright. And now that Grandmother’s here, our aunt might be bothered as well. I’m just going to tell them everyone’s alright, and take Krai home too. We left our dad with only Dran, not the best combo...”

Cessilia nodded. Indeed, now that Kassian was mentioning it, she was just realizing several days had passed already since she had left their home. Moreover, even if her parents knew Cece was back and the dragons were fine, it couldn’t match up to an actual explanation. She felt a bit guilty for not realizing how many days had passed since their parents had last heard from her... She had never been away from both of them for so long either. Because of her parents’ respective duties, she was used to traveling from one of their familial residences to another, or to her grandmother’s, but with their dragons, it only took a few hours for the longest ones. Not only that, but Cessilia thought about her younger siblings too.

“I hadn’t realized,” she muttered. “It’s been over a week already...”

“It’s alright,” Kassian chuckled. “Don’t fret over it. You, Darsan, and I are already adults, they wouldn’t have allowed you here if they didn’t trust you. Plus, Kiera has disappeared for longer than that once or twice...”

Cessilia smiled at the mention of her infamous runaway sister. She knew Kassian wasn’t meaning to make her feel guilty, but she did owe a bit of an explanation to their parents, and to return Krai to her father too. Although she was a bit sad for him to leave, she knew they’d see each other again soon enough.

“So you’ll tell them about Ashen?” she tilted her head.

“I’ll have to. He’s the main reason Father couldn’t really come... I may have made peace with him, but it’s not exactly like they parted on good terms.”

This time, Cessilia was the one to smile.

“Tell them I’ll come back home soon... with Ashen and Cece.”

“I guess we can consider the Eastern Kingdom’s skies as reopened to our dragons then.”

“Careful what you wish for!” exclaimed a familiar voice behind them.

They both turned around to see Lady Kareen coming down the road, elegant as always. Surprisingly, she was able to walk with her high heels on the more than bumpy road as if it had been perfectly flat. She walked up to the two of them, her arms crossed, and her shoulders covered with a thick fur cape to protect herself from the cold.

“Grandmother,” said Kassian, surprised to see her. “...I was wondering where you’d been.”

“Since when do I have to report to you?” she shrugged.

“You drank a lot last night,” he said, “...on purpose and despite us trying to stop you. And this morning, you were gone already. Were you trying to elude us?”

“Oh, leave an old lady to have some fun!” she slapped his shoulder. “Don’t be so uptight, I hate that I am old enough for my grandchildren to be the ones to scold me!”

Cessilia chuckled. Indeed, their temperamental matriarch was never one to follow the rules.

“Anyways, don’t tell your siblings about them being allowed to visit,” she said. “Before you know it, there’ll be half a dozen brats sent here on a field trip!”

“You mean you don’t want them to come here because you want to be able to drink,” laughed Kassian.

“Exactly! How can I have any peace when everyone keeps using me to babysit their brats?!”

Cessilia and Kassian exchanged a glance. Of course, they knew the regular trips from all members of the family to their grandmother’s Diamond Palace was more to look after her than for her to look after them. Not only their siblings, but all their cousins also liked to go to the Diamond Palace to escape their parents’ scrutiny and spend time with their more lax grandmother. Despite Kassian, Cessilia, and their siblings being the only grandchildren blood-related to her, there was a silent agreement that any child of the Imperial Family regarded Lady Kareen as their grandmother. Thus, they all took turns visiting Kareen in her palace, well aware she didn’t enjoy being alone as much as she pretended to...

“You can’t hide here forever,” sighed Kassian. “Aunt Shareen will be upset if you stay too long.”

“Ha! Since when did she care about me? I’d rather stay here just to piss her off!”

Cessilia chuckled. The feud between the Empress and her mother was almost legendary. Now it sounded like the main reason for Lady Kareen to be here was to be away from her daughter’s watch... Cessilia and Kassian exchanged a quick glance.

“You can stay here as long as you want, Grandmother,” smiled Cessilia.

“I still have to report to Aunt Shareen what happened,” added Kassian. “I’ll probably come back soon, unless they send somebody else.”

“I will probably go home to see them soon, actually,” his sister declared.

“Really?”

Cessilia nodded.

“We have a few ideas. I know Aunt Shareen will probably already be inclined to the idea, but tell her the King plans to reopen the border and

establish new trades. I will come soon, with at least two envoys. ...That includes Lady Bastat.”

She tried to see if her brother would react to the name, but Kassian remained calm and stoic as usual, only giving her a brief nod. He then turned to their grandmother once more.

“I’m going to take Roun back too.”

“What! Why?”

“I’m pretty sure you did not ask Uncle before taking him. And Tessandra’s disappearance might go unnoticed for a few days but a missing dragon is a bit much, Grandmother.”

“Ha! See, this is why I prefer Darsan!”

Cessilia chuckled. Still, completely ignoring her words, Kassian placed a quick kiss on their grandmother’s hand, and exchanged a quick nod with his sister before leaving. She watched Kassian go and disappear down the road. Next to her, Kareen sighed.

“That kid. He’s always been way too serious.”

“He’s feeling a lot of responsibility as the next Emperor,” Cessilia nodded. “I wish he’d be a bit more honest about his feelings. I am sure he and Lady Bastat would be a good match.”

“Leave him be,” shrugged the old woman. “He might be the heir to the Golden Throne, but he’s your father’s son before the Empress’ heir. If he’s anything like your father, he’ll come along. And we both know he is.”

“And... where is Ashen?”

Cessilia turned to her grandmother, raising an eyebrow. She was pretty sure she had left her grandmother with him just minutes ago, so why did only the old lady come out of the castle? However, Lady Kareen shrugged, looking unbothered as always.

“How would I know?” she said. “He’s a King, he has to be busy with something. What about you, my darling?”

“I was on my way to visit the Cheshi Clan... Actually, Grandmother, you should probably come too. I have a few questions for them, but you’re the one who knows dragons best in the Dragon Empire.”

Lady Kareen tilted her head, intrigued.

“They are an old clan,” Cessilia quickly explained. “Somehow related to Mom’s native tribe...”

“Yes,” sighed Kareen. “Your brother sort of explained it to me, although I am still quite interested by all this. What does it have to do with me, though?”

“You’re the one who knows the most about dragons in our family...”

“I don’t know much, Cessilia. I know what I learned from raising a bunch of those scaled pets.”

“But Grandfather told you a lot too, didn’t he?”

Kareen’s expression slightly changed. Cessilia knew her late grandfather was a sensitive topic in the family. For most of the Dragon Empire, he was the former Emperor, but to Cessilia, he was a grandfather she had never met, and Kareen’s former lover. The subject was almost taboo within the family, but over the years, Cessilia had gathered some pieces. She suspected a lot of Lady Kareen’s incredible dragon taming despite not being a dragon owner herself was related to her late grandfather... and perhaps some more secrets.

“Cessilia, what is this really about?” Kareen frowned, crossing her arms once again.

“...I want to know what truly happened to Cece.”

Her grandmother looked surprised, but for Cessilia, the question had been pending ever since her dragon’s return. She loved her dragon and she was overjoyed that Cece was back, but she still needed to find out how that miracle had been made possible. Everything she had already learned from the Cheshi seemed like the beginning of an explanation, but Cessilia had

a feeling the rest of that explanation might come from none other than her enigmatic grandmother herself.

After a while, a faint smile appeared on her grandmother's lips.

"You truly are your mother's daughter... Alright, I shall meet those Cheshi you and Kassian bothered me about. I'm curious to see what they think they know better than the Dragon Empire itself."

Cessilia smiled and nodded. Kareen grabbed her granddaughter's arm for her to lead, but before they could walk more than just a few steps, she suddenly heard someone calling her name from farther behind them.

"Cessilia!" he called again.

"Ashen!"

"Damn it," grumbled her grandmother.

Ignoring her, Cessilia walked up to Ashen, surprised to see him already. The King had visibly rushed from the castle, a bit out of breath, to catch up with them. He was just as she had left him that morning, except that he was now fully dressed, without any armor this time. He had only his sword on his belt, and a hooded cloak hiding most of his figure. Cessilia was a bit surprised by the hood, wondering if he intended to hide himself from his citizens.

"Grandmother said you were busy," said Cessilia, sending a suspicious glance toward her grandmother.

"Did she? I'm sure I said I'd be ready soon, Lady Kareen," sighed Ashen.

This was getting more and more suspicious, especially the way her grandmother was trying to act all innocent. Suddenly, Ashen took off his hood, and Cessilia's jaw dropped. She finally understood why Lady Kareen had acted so suspicious.

He had cut his white hair short!

"Ashen!" Cessilia exclaimed, shocked.

She walked up to him, completely taken by surprise. His long white hair was gone. He now had a sharp cut on the sides, and just a couple of inches of white hair on top and behind his head. Strangely, the simple but radical haircut changed his overall appearance drastically. He strangely somehow seemed taller, and even a bit younger. Cessilia caressed the side of his head, surprised that the short hair felt like a soft brush under her fingertips. She bit her lower lip, a bit excited. It was like discovering a new Ashen...

“Grandmother!” she exclaimed, turning to the old woman, a bit annoyed. “That’s too much!”

“What?” shrugged the lady. “I merely gave your man a couple of suggestions, I didn’t do anything!”

Cessilia kept glaring at her grandmother, annoyed. She could bet her grandmother’s suggestions had hit a nerve for Ashen to do such a thing... She turned back to him.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.

“Don’t worry,” he laughed. “I’ll survive. Moreover, I do feel lighter. ...Do you like it?”

Cessilia blushed and nodded shyly. In fact, she was surprised by how much she liked it. She caressed his hair some more, pretending to play with the new length, well aware of Ashen’s amused eyes on her. He had clearly done this all by himself and quite quickly. Probably with a sharp blade from something like a dagger, judging by the slightly uneven length in some parts. Perhaps he’d let her even it out later... but she also liked it a bit messy.

“...I think I like it a lot,” she whispered.

He smiled and gently kissed her, Cessilia answering the quick kiss with delight. He had even shaved his beard, leaving his chin and cheeks completely smooth. There was a fresh thin cut on his chin already healing by itself.

“Children,” said Kareen, sounding a bit annoyed, “I’m still here. Literally, right here.”

“...Thank you for the suggestion, Grandmother,” chuckled Cessilia, slowly parting from him. “I like it.”

She took Ashen’s hand, while Kareen put on a little amused smile.

“See? Your grandmother’s always right.”

“From now on, I’d like it if you didn’t push your opinions on my love though, Grandmother,” Cessilia frowned.

Ashen chuckled, amused to hear Cessilia come to his defense, and put a quick kiss on her forehead.

“Where were you two headed?”

“The Cheshi Clan’s residence,” Cessilia explained, resuming their walk. “Apparently, Aglithia asked for me... I figured I’d bring Grandmother too.”

Ashen nodded and followed her. Cessilia wondered if it would be alright for him to visit his mother’s birth tribe. Despite knowing of her origins, he actually hadn’t been on good terms with the Cheshi for a long while now... This would be the first time he interacted so closely with that clan. They had remained out of sight when he was a child, and mostly ignored him as a King. For them to have changed their position for the war might not be enough to erase their difficult past with Ashen...

Still, he didn’t say anything for the whole trip, but didn’t look annoyed or reluctant to go either. Cessilia had become better at deciphering his expressions, and she could tell he was completely fine. If anything, he seemed happy to spend more time with her. Their fingers remained interlaced for the entire time they walked to the Cheshi residence.

When they finally got there, Lady Kareen frowned, and raised her eyes toward the door.

“...That’s it?” she asked.

Cessilia nodded, and before she could add anything, the doors slowly opened. Aglithia stepped out, and was surprised to see the two extra guests

accompanying Cessilia. She quickly hid her surprise though and bowed politely to the two of them.

“Your Majesty, Lady Kareen, it’s an honor.”

“...You know who I am?” Kareen raised an eyebrow.

“Of course. We have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“Ha,” scoffed the older lady. “...My kind of people.”

Cessilia smiled. Indeed, it was exactly like her grandmother. Even years and years after the last battle in the Dragon Empire, she still had spies in every noble and Imperial residence, so that even while visiting once in a while, no one could hide anything from her. The Cheshi were probably no stranger to those kinds of practices either... Cessilia wouldn’t have even been surprised if they’d been followed all along.

“Please, do come in,” said Aglithia. “We have some tea ready. It’s a good thing you came, Your Majesty, we have already interrogated quite a number of prisoners.”

“The invitation got lost then,” grumbled Ashen.

Cessilia grimaced. So maybe not everything was forgiven yet, after all... but Ashen was right. Even though those were his prisoners, Aglithia had looked for her, not for the King himself. It probably wasn’t out of shyness either. Aglithia pretended not to hear that.

“My granddaughter mentioned that you and your people have interesting knowledge about dragons,” said Kareen, with a mighty tone in her voice. “I’m curious to hear what you pretend to know better than our family.”

“Oh, we are not that arrogant, my lady! But, our clan takes its pride in centuries-old knowledge which we have preciousely kept and studied relentlessly... I do have something to show you, if you’d like. As Lady Cessilia’s grandmother, it’s only right for you to see it too.”

“The prisoners first,” said Ashen. “I don’t care much for your legends, I need to sort out what to do with our war prisoners and the Yekara Clan.”

Aglithia nodded.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Just as we suspected, a lot of the Yekara tried to commit suicide before we could interrogate them, but luckily, we managed to stop most before they took their own lives. We lost a dozen this way, but all the others have stopped trying. All the men who weren’t part of the Yekara Clan to begin with were, as we expected, either hired mercenaries, former survivors of the Kunu Tribe, or random bandits. All of them were promised they’d be able to loot after the battle and take what they wanted, but from what information we have gathered, it is more likely that the Yekara had planned to get rid of their allies right after the battle.”

“Where are they now?”

“We decided to detain most of them in our fortresses, and some are still held by the Royal Guards that remained loyal to you, Your Majesty. What do you intend to do with them...?”

Ashen remained silent. It was clear that was no light question, Aglithia’s eyes were scrutinizing him. Cessilia could also tell: whatever Ashen planned to do with the survivors would have long-term consequences on the future of the Kingdom. If he was too lenient, he’d be taken as a weak leader, and expose himself to more attacks in the future. On the contrary, if he was too cruel in his punishment, he would be considered a tyrant no matter how hard he had worked to improve his image. It was truly a difficult choice...

“It’s going to take a while,” he suddenly muttered.

“A while?” Aglithia seemed surprised.

“The Kunu have already betrayed me twice,” he said. “I won’t give them another chance. Those who were captured will be executed.”

“...Understood. What about the others?”

Cessilia couldn’t help but be a bit upset at Aglithia. Although she would obey his orders right away, it was clear the Cheshi were still testing their King. She had hoped they would have already made up their minds after all this.

“The Yekara will pay their debt as war prisoners,” Ashen declared. “They have caused a lot of damage to the citizens’ homes and our Capital’s streets. They will be forced to work and repair everything, and the clan’s money and goods will be confiscated to pay for all the repairs, including some compensation money for those who have lost their family members in the battle.”

This time, Aglithia seemed genuinely surprised. Cessilia glanced toward her grandmother, but Kareen had a faint smile on, one of those smirks that meant she was content with Ashen’s decision. In fact, even without confirming with her, Cessilia would have thought his suggestion was good too. Moreover, judging from what Aglithia had said, there would be Yekara who would commit suicide either way. For them to choose death was not the King’s concern, and their suicides would not stain his honor nor make any citizen cry for them. In fact, having them repair the damages was a far better way to punish them. Even once all the repairs were done, their clan would be ruined, and its members considered traitors. It was truly the end of that clan, a downfall they had paved for themselves.

“...I think that’s a good idea, Your Majesty,” finally said Aglithia. “May I ask why you said it would take a while, though?”

Ashen suddenly glanced toward Cessilia, a bit enigmatically, before turning back to the Cheshi woman.

“The mercenaries were mostly chosen amongst men that were out of jobs, desperate. Many of those we thought had little to no experience with sword fighting. I want all of them to be interrogated one by one. It is unlikely they will also try to commit suicide, so I want their trials to be held fairly. ...As their King, I want to hear each of their stories. How they came to this, how they will redeem themselves, and what is their better alternative. The state of our Kingdom is partially at fault for pushing those men to risk their lives in a fight that wasn’t theirs. I want to hear it all.”

Cessilia was genuinely impressed. So he had listened to her plea, and was willing to go that far to listen to those men. Most leaders would have simply gotten rid of them, or treated them like the others, as war prisoners and criminals. Yet, Ashen was taking a different approach. He wasn’t only

going to hear those men, he was going to listen to the troubles his people were facing, to their hopes for the future, and to all the difficulties that were still blocking their way. It was a lot more than what he would have allowed just weeks ago.

“...With all due respect, Your Majesty, what are we supposed to do with those men in the meantime? The Cheshi can provide prisons to hold them, but we won’t feed prisoners with our own money, and if all of the Yekara’s goes to the repairs—”

“I will take care of that,” announced Kareen.

They all turned their eyes toward her, surprised. However, the matriarch already had a sneaky smile on her lips.

“Why not?” she scoffed. “Young man, I will need men to build my palace here, will I not? You just need to save a few necks, and they will work for me.”

“You’re not to dispose of war prisoners as you please, Lady Kareen,” sighed Ashen. “This is my Kingdom’s matter.”

“I’m being more than generous to offer to feed a bunch of ruffians,” she retorted. “Didn’t you mention most of those people were desperate for a job? I want my palace, I will have it, and I will need servants, guards, and workers for that. I am just making a headstart and a small investment for my own future ambition. Consider this as indulging an old lady.”

Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a look. They both knew this had little to do with Kareen’s desire for her future residence. The cunning old woman was actually offering to lessen one of their burdens for them. Ashen wanted to rely on the Cheshi as little as possible, but the current state of the Kingdom was such that no one else would be able to pay for food for so many criminals while they were waiting to be judged individually. Ashen would have probably saved a lot by simply executing them all, but the young King was choosing the harder path. And Lady Kareen had just offered him the help he needed to keep up with that. It might have been a bit of a stain on his pride, but accepting the older woman’s financial help was a better alternative than requesting that money from any other family. For now,

Ashen wouldn't be able to accept any tribe or clan's help. If they were planning to reform the Kingdom, they couldn't give too much power to one of the tribes by owing a debt.

"...Fine," he finally muttered. "Then those prisoners will repay their debt toward Lady Kareen for their food and clothing after their sentence has been decided. They will work for the lady as compensation for as long as it takes for their debt to be settled. Is that alright with you?"

Aglithia nodded, visibly impressed. Thanks to Lady Kareen, the King had solved two problems already. Not only would he be free from any debt toward Kareen if the prisoners repaid their food by working for her, but that would also provide those men with jobs as soon as their trials were over. Cessilia smiled, glancing toward her grandmother, who responded with a little wink. She did like Ashen after all...

"Understood, Your Majesty," said Aglithia, bowing to him.

It definitely felt like something had changed between them. Aglithia was now acting much more respectful of her King, acting more cautious too. She glanced quickly toward Kareen, but the tall lady was simply standing still, her attitude the same as earlier. It was as if she confirmed the person who deserved the utmost respect in the room wasn't her. Then, Aglithia turned to Ashen once more.

"I'll relay Your Majesty's orders, and we will immediately start with the executions. I need to inform Your Majesty, the Royal Guards also insisted on taking care of the traitors amongst them. They are holding those that were arrested elsewhere."

"That's fine by me, I'll settle that with them later."

Cessilia realized she hadn't seen Sabael much since the battle had began. She hoped Nana's older brother would help Ashen sort his former comrades' fate as well. Having traitors amongst the Royal Guards was one of the most obvious confirmations that this Kingdom needed deep changes...

Aglithia nodded once again, and finally turned around, leading them farther into the depths of their residence. It was now a familiar corridor to Cessilia, although it was less busy than before. She could guess many of the Cheshi were already preoccupied with the prisoners, tracking the last enemies of the King, or resting after the long battle. In fact, it was so quiet that their steps echoed in the patios they crossed. Finally, they entered that one specific prayer room. Aglithia slowly opened the door, revealing to the trio the mosaic of the two dragons. Cessilia had already seen it, so she was more curious about her grandmother's reaction to it. To her surprise, Kareen hardly seemed surprised.

"...Is that it?" she muttered, glancing toward Aglithia.

"Of course not! But this mosaic is our most precious piece, and to us, also a priceless symbol of our loyalty to the Dragon Masters. The legend behind that mosaic is one we have transmitted for generations..."

Aglithia went on to share with Kareen and Ashen exactly the same tale as her grandmother had given Cessilia and the others not that long ago. It was exactly the same tale, word for word, so precise that Cessilia realized the Cheshi actually knew it all by heart. It was probably their way of ensuring the story would be kept intact over the years... When Aglithia was done, she glanced toward Kareen, expecting a reaction.

However, the old lady had her eyes riveted on the mosaic, with an almost bored expression. For a few seconds, no one said a word, and Kareen kept staring at the duo of dragons, her arms crossed.

"Is that it?" she asked again with a smile on her lips.

"You... don't look surprised," said Aglithia, slightly upset.

"Darling, studying dragons from outdated legends and books is one thing..."

Kareen slowly walked up to the mosaic, and raised her fingers to caress the obsidian scales of the Black Dragon, that amused smile still on her lips.

"...But you children will never truly know what dragons are."

“Dragons are gods!” protested Aglithia.

“Dragons are like men,” retorted Kareen. “Each one is different, each one has their own story. You can worship a gutter rat like a god, it won’t make it one. Men created such legends to reassure themselves of their power over dragons. If we know them enough, we can control them.”

“We do not seek to control them!”

“Then why are you hiding in a bloody basement and clinging on to my grandchildren?” retorted Kareen. “I heard how you acted while your King struggled to keep this Kingdom afloat. You are nothing like Dragon Masters. You’re like those politicians hiding themselves behind grand speeches and never lifting a finger. Keep polishing that mosaic, child. That’s as close to understanding dragons as your clan will ever get!”

Leaving a completely baffled Aglithia standing there, Kareen sent one last disdainful glance toward the room and walked out, standing as tall and mighty as an empress. Cessilia hesitated before following her grandmother outside, Ashen right behind her.

“Weren’t you a bit harsh, Grandmother...?”

“So what?” she scoffed. “It’s not like I owe those people anything. Moreover, I despise those kinds of schemers. People living off dragons’ scraps like vermin... acting almighty when they know nothing. I know exactly what their kind is. Too weak to act, like dogs barking only when their master’s around. The Imperial Palace used to be infested with those. Leave them be.”

Cessilia couldn’t help but think this had still gone horribly wrong... and her grandmother probably would never get along with the Cheshi people from there on. Both sides were remarkably stubborn. Suddenly, while walking back into one of the residence’s patios, they spotted none other than the Cheshi Clan Leader walking alone. Kareen didn’t even seem to notice the man and kept walking ahead, but behind Cessilia, Ashen froze. She glanced back. The King’s eyes on the Clan Leader standing on the other side of the patio were full of mixed emotions. Anger, defiance, uncertainty. She couldn’t even decipher them all. Still, he didn’t say

anything, his jawline looking tense. The man he was glaring at had a similar expression. It wasn't so full of animosity, but both men were staring at each other, gauging each other, with a palpable tension in the air. Ashen's hand around Cessilia's tightened a bit.

"Lord Marau," he hissed.

So he knew the man's name, after all. Lord Marau was completely still, his gaze also riveted on Ashen. Those two definitely had some unresolved issues... and they would have to resolve them someday, for the sake of the Kingdom. While Cessilia somehow got along with Aglithia, and the Cheshi Clan seemed to have made its peace with the King, Ashen hadn't really made peace with them yet. After a few more seconds of silence, Cessilia glanced ahead, but her grandmother was already out of sight.

"...Ashen?" she finally muttered.

"Go with Lady Kareen," he finally said. "I'll find you later."

Cessilia glanced at Aglithia's father, a bit worried. Would that really be alright? At least both men didn't look like they were about to jump at each other's throats. Still, Ashen had quite the temper... Cessilia let out a faint sigh. After all, he was the King. He could handle this without her. She put a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Play nice," she whispered.

"I'll try."

She then walked out, glancing one last time at Lord Marau. She wondered what that man would have to say to his former fiancé's son... Whatever it was, Cessilia knew it wasn't her place to intervene. As close as she was to Ashen, she knew he had his own demons to overcome, and a complicated past she wasn't a part of.

Leaving Ashen behind, Cessilia had to accelerate her pace a bit to catch up with her grandmother. Kareen was actually already back outside the residence, arms crossed, staring at the locals who were starting their tasks for the day. Many of them seemed intrigued by the burgundy-haired woman, sending her curious glances, although they didn't dare approach

her. Either Kareen intimidated them or because she was standing in front of the enigmatic Cheshi residence, no locals were brave enough to do more than steal a few glances in her direction. Cessilia joined her, a faint smile on her lips.

“You’re getting some attention, Grandmother.”

“Don’t I always?”

A smile on Cessilia’s lips widened. It seemed to be her grandmother’s curse: always admired, always envied, but always alone... At the very least, her family always stuck around, no matter how much she feigned complaining about it. Cessilia took her grandmother’s arm, guiding her through the streets. For a little while, the two women gently paced side by side, touring the busy streets and gathering more attention.

“...Why were you so mad? About the Cheshi?” Cessilia finally asked.

“Did I seem mad?”

“To your granddaughter who knows you well, yes. A bit.”

Kareen chuckled.

“That’s my granddaughter for you, so perceptive. ...Yes, I am slightly upset. It’s not against them. I simply can’t stand that such people are still alive, even so far from the Imperial Palace.”

“What do you mean?”

Kareen let out a faint sigh.

“I refused for the longest time to live in the Imperial Palace. Your grandfather, that silly man, tried to coerce me by any means, but as you know, he never got the last word. My main reason was to protect my children from political intrigues, assassins, and wretched schemers. Don’t let yourself be fooled by these people, Cessilia. They might be on your side because you’re a daughter of the Dragon Empire, a dragon owner, but people born and raised in the shadows will always belong to the dark. How many people do you think they are ready to let die for their own pride? They barely acknowledged your King, from what I heard and saw.

Ashen is right not to rely on those kinds of clans too heavily. That boy might be too self-centered, but at least he's got good instincts."

Cessilia thought of Ashen's mother. That woman probably was as headstrong as her grandmother, from her understanding. She had left her clan and gone through many hardships to raise her sons the way she wanted to. In the end, was the sacrifice worth it? ...Perhaps. After all, it was as if she had earned her own freedom. Cessilia understood her grandmother's words. It would have been foolish to trust a clan who had turned their back on this Kingdom for so many years so easily. They might be useful as spies and assassins, but it would take a long, long while before they proved their loyalty for real.

"Do you think I trust too easily?" Cessilia frowned.

"I think this world needs more women like you and your mother," chuckled Karen. "Not every woman can wield a sword, but every woman is a fighter."

Cessilia smiled.

"I think I heard something similar recently."

"Because it's true, and something the women in our family live by. Far too many times, women are underestimated. It is both a strength and a weakness. That goes for Ashen as well, Cessilia. That boy might be right for you, but remember, you're right for him too."

Cessilia smiled and nodded. Even without her grandmother saying it, she felt like she had already come a long way since she had landed in the Eastern Kingdom, and learned many things.

They walked a bit longer, lightly chatting about the shops Cessilia was starting to know about. One of Nana's cousins who recognized her even walked over to offer them some warm tea she was selling, and some dried fruits to snack on, all for free. She was the only one who approached them, but by now, many people were out in the streets, busy trying to get back to a normal life, either by clearing the debris, starting to repair their houses and shops, or, for the luckiest ones, resuming business as usual. The more

they walked, the more the two women naturally drifted toward the seashore. They were just a couple of streets away from the docks and, to her surprise, her grandmother didn't seem bothered at all by the smell of fish.

“Grandmother...”

“Yes?”

“Do you believe that legend? About the pair of Earth and Sea Dragons? About that... mountain and that cave.”

“Why do you ask that?” smiled Kareen, who already knew what Cessilia really wanted to know.

“Cece,” muttered Cessilia. “You know I need to know. How did she come back? It has to do with that legend, right? ...How did Mother know? I thought she simply suggested putting her in the lake of the Imperial Palace as a burial for a dragon, or so I wouldn't be too sad, but she knew, didn't she? She knew Cece would be back. Just... how?”

A mysterious smile appeared on Kareen's lips.

“I'm not sure your mother really knew,” she said. “Perhaps she took a chance.”

She didn't add anything, but Cessilia was getting restless. She ought to know more. She could tell there were some secrets her family hadn't disclosed yet, and she had rarely questioned them until now. Until it became about Cece too.

“Grandmother,” she insisted. “...Please. I know Mother and Father both won't talk about it. This is related to what happened to my mother before I was born, isn't it? Kassian told me and Darsan. Krai was always by that lake... That place really is special, isn't it?”

After a while, Kareen sighed.

“...The lake itself isn't special. It's what's hidden beneath it that is.”

“What's hidden beneath?”

“It’s true,” said Kareen, staring far ahead. “Your mother died, shortly after Kassian was born.”

Cessilia was stunned. She had always had a hunch, but neither her or her brother had ever been able to confirm it. Their parents always firmly ignored that subject... Her mother would put on a sad smile and change the topic, while their father would look deeply hurt and angry. Both their reactions had made it so neither of them dared to ask twice.

“Just... how?”

“She died in the battle opposing one of your uncles, a wretched man who murdered your grandfather. Sadly, your mother gave her own life in that conflict. ...Shortly before, though, she had found out how special that lake truly was.”

“Why the lake...?”

A faint smile appeared on Kareen’s lips.

“The best secrets aren’t uncovered in centuries-old libraries, but in a man’s bed, Cessilia. Your grandfather had told me once that there was a secret buried deep in that lake. Something only the Emperor and their heir ought to know. He had told me, in case something happened to him, and with the intention that Kairen would become the next Emperor. Deep, deep, in the depths of that lake, a legendary creature was hidden.”

“...A legendary creature?”

“Yes. A dragon so old, it was more a deity than a creature. No mortal could tame it, and the dragon always hid so deep inside the lake, no one could reach it. With the centuries going by, and the dragon never resurfacing, it had become no more than a legend passed on to the next generation.”

“...But the Sea Dragon was there,” muttered Cessilia. “Wasn’t it? My mother’s birth tribe was the Rain Tribe. They had ties to the Sea Dragon... and that’s how she was saved. The Sea Dragon saved my mom’s life.”

“It did not save her,” said Kareen. “Your mother was indeed dead, and her body was taken to the lake, just like your Cece. She stayed there for an

awfully long time. Months, many months. If not for Kassian being just a newborn who needed his dad then, I don't know how your father would have endured it. He was heartbroken... It's no wonder neither of them can bear to talk about this, even today. That was the hardest time of their lives."

"So... Mother came back thanks to the Sea Dragon."

"Yes. She briefly talked with me about that matter, although it wasn't clear for her either. She did see that great dragon, that forgotten god from the depths."

Cessilia wasn't exactly shocked to hear all this, but it was still heavy on the heart. She knew the incredible love that united her parents. Many times, she had been the prime witness of it. Those gazes, kisses, and gentle gestures exchanged between her parents. Despite having so many children, her parents never forgot to have a tender moment with each other. She almost suspected they stayed apart for days just to be even happier to reunite. Or perhaps, did her mother know they should wait until the next child...?

At times, there was this strange worry in her father's eyes. If the smallest thing happened to their mother, something as small as a flower's thorn pricking her finger, he'd get incredibly protective. Even with his children. Cessilia had many memories of her father being her favorite shadow, the strong arms she easily hid in, whenever she felt shy to the world. She knew her father was a strong man, a warrior who had fought every battle... yet she had never imagined his biggest scar was invisible.

"Do you think... the same dragon deity healed my Cece the same way?"

"It's possible," smiled Kareen, "if a dragon is still down there. Or perhaps, the centuries-long home of a Dragon God became a sanctuary itself. Who knows? But you know, your mother did say something. She said that water, in the depths of the lake, had a salty taste."

"Salty?"

Cessilia frowned. How could a lake's water possibly be salty? Moreover, she knew that lake well. Her siblings, their dragons, and she often played by that lake. They'd even swim and fool around in the shallow bank of it. She had never tasted that water to be anything close to salty...

"Could it be connected to the sea? That would tie it to the legend..."

"Maybe," smiled her grandmother, "but only your mother could swim deep enough to tell."

Cessilia was almost hoping she'd get to go home and swim in the depths of that lake now. She had never shown any interest because Tessandra and her younger siblings couldn't follow her that deep, but perhaps, if she tried to go really, really deep, she'd find that salty water...

"You're thinking a lot," chuckled Kareen.

"What about the Earth Dragon?" Cessilia immediately asked. "Krai... I mean, my father's dragon and their ancestors were all earth dragons, before what happened to Mother with the Sea God. Do we know where the other dragon rested, if it was still alive?"

Kareen smiled enigmatically.

"That legend... Do you remember the last dragons exchange?"

It took a few seconds for Cessilia to remember, with certainty, what those had been.

"I shall wait until the time when our children meet again, and our bloods become one, like when we were born. When that time comes, I will know your children made the world safe for them, and my offspring will finally come to the world. I will meet my human again, and give her the rest of my life, so I can join you in this blissful rest they call death. Then, you and I can rest peacefully, as I will have witnessed that our children will live on, safe and together."

"Exactly," nodded Kareen.

"It doesn't explain how that lake came to have salty water," muttered Cessilia, "nor how it was capable of healing Cece, after it... resurrected

my mother. Even if Cece had just a breath of life left in her, all of the Sea Dragon's life should have been passed on to Mother. So how did that lake...?"

"When our children meet again," said Kareen, "and our bloods become one.' Don't you have any idea how their blood would become one?"

Cessilia frowned.

"They died... in the same place?" she suddenly guessed. "They were apart all this time, but they reunited there?"

An enigmatic smile appeared on Kareen's lips, and she stopped walking, her eyes fixated on the ocean.

"Who knows how far and deep this ocean runs under the ground we walk on? Who knows how many centuries it takes for a mountain to become a hill? And who could possibly know the desire for two long-lost lovers to reunite, beyond time and space?"

Cessilia was stunned.

The dragons' story was so like her parents... she only realized then. They had gone through the death of the other, only to be reunited, a long, long time after. Perhaps it had taken centuries, but perhaps neither had ever really given up. Had the Sea Dragon dug its way, day after day, year after year, for centuries, back to that mountain where its love had died? To die in that lake, but not before witnessing how their children had finally come to be one again. The dragon had met Cassandra, one of the last descendants of its precious, long-lost, and beloved human, and finally been able to rest in peace... right in the place where the Earth Dragon had passed.

"...The vault," muttered Cessilia. "The Imperial Dragon Vault, the one Glahad guards. It's a cave, isn't it? I saw it once... a very old cave. But it's far above the ground level."

"You're a smart child, Cessilia. Yes, this place used to be the very heart of a mountain... a mountain Glahad's ancestors ferociously protected for centuries. Why do you think that stubborn old dragon never leaves it? It's

his duty, and it is the duty of the strongest dragons in our family. Even Krai guards it at times now. And your brother's dragon will guard it too, someday. And, according to your mother, that place is connected to—”

“To the lake,” smiled Cessilia. “Isn't it? That explains a lot... that explains how Jinn was taken out without our family knowing!”

“Jinn?”

“The Red Dragon from the beach. Wouldn't we have noticed another dragon egg appearing?”

Kareen smiled enigmatically once again.

“There are still many things we don't know about our dragons, my Cessi. They are as sacred as they are our companions. That is why such secrets like their birth, the vault, and the eggs should remain a secret, always. Especially from people like the Cheshi. Do not forget. No one should know the dragons better than dragons themselves, Cessilia. Leave them a few of their secrets. That's the best way we will ever protect them and our family.”

“I will,” Cessilia promised.