

Chapter 32

For a while, neither of them added anything, simply staring at the sea and its waves. Because they had walked closer and closer to the Fish Market, not only were the familiar smells getting to them, but the voices and sounds as well. Cessilia could hear Nana's uncles and aunts starting their work day as usual, perhaps working even harder to help the Kingdom after this complicated battle. The smell of delicious beignet dough soon came to their noses, and she heard her grandmother take a deep breath.

"Ah... this is what an old woman like me needs," she said. "New delicacies, fresh air, and some place to have new fun."

"So you really plan on staying?" Cessilia couldn't help but ask.

"Of course. I have a feeling my first great-grandbabies will be born in this Eastern Kingdom, do you think I would possibly miss that?!"

Cessilia blushed. Children... She hadn't even dared think about it recently. To think her grandmother already expected some... unless she meant that it would take a while for Kassian to find his partner? But there was Darsan too, and his relationship with Nana would probably keep progressing smoothly. Cessilia didn't know what to add after that, so she said nothing. But to her surprise, her grandmother chuckled.

"There you go again, my Cessilia. Too serious... You really are your parents' child. Don't worry. I still plan to live on for a few more years, you have plenty of time. Moreover, this place really does need some work..."

She stared down at a portion of the street they stood in, where the locals had gathered the pieces of debris that nothing could be done with. Some children were clearly given the task to sort it out as they were busy

organizing it into piles of wood, metal, or stones with little brooms, an older boy in charge. The sight gave Cessilia an idea.

“You should become one of the counselors,” she said.

“Me?” her grandmother exclaimed. “Why would I? This old lady is long retired from politics!”

“Ashen could use someone like you,” Cessilia insisted. “Grandmother, you know politics and men better than anyone! It’s going to take a while before we get a new council going and finish digging out all of the traitors. You’re unbiased as a non-citizen of the Kingdom, and you’re the wisest, most clear-sighted person I know.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere, Cessilia. Like I said, I just want a palace and fresh morning cocktails every day until the end of my life. Actually, a view of the sea would be nice, as well.”

“You’re not just going to stay here doing nothing while Ashen and I struggle,” Cessilia smiled. “I know you too well, Grandmother. You just don’t know how to sit back when our family is in trouble...”

“This old lady already outlived two Emperors, Cessilia. I do not want to have to take care of that brat of a king too!”

“Think about it. Please. It’s not like you’ll be busy until your palace is done... in many, many months.”

Her grandmother rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, directing her stare toward the Fish Market rather than facing her stubborn granddaughter. Cessilia didn’t insist, but she was confident she’d get her grandmother to change her mind. Now that this tiny seed was planted in her mind, Lady Kareen would most likely keep an eye on the politics of this Kingdom, and she would definitely come out of her palace to help if they ever needed it. Perhaps she wouldn’t become a counselor, but Cessilia had learned to aim high if she wanted to hit anything at all...

“Who are you calling a brat of a king, Lady Kareen?”

Behind them, Ashen appeared, sighing. Cessilia had temporarily forgotten about his new haircut, so she got to discover it a second time, with much pleasure when she turned around. She couldn't help herself and walked up to him, a big smile on her face. Ashen smiled back, grabbing her hands. Beside them, Lady Kareen clicked her tongue loudly, a habit when she was annoyed, one she had passed on to most of her children and grandchildren.

"Who else?" she shrugged. "You're too green to call yourself a man just yet."

"I'm up for a challenge," Ashen retorted. "Moreover, I heard the War God himself gets called a brat..."

Cessilia bit her lower lip to keep herself from laughing. Indeed, her grandmother wasn't gentle with the men she cared about... She never had been. Ashen then turned his eyes to Cessi. He looked a bit calmer, more serene than before.

"Sorry," he said. "Our talk took a bit... longer than expected."

"Did you manage to tell him everything you wanted to say?"

"I hope so... I probably still won't become the Cheshi's favorite King, but that can't be helped. I don't think I'll ever really trust them either. They never really forgave my mother, and neither did she. So, I think we might have to leave it at that for a while. I've already learned to ignore them, anyway. And since they are quite obsessed with my future Queen..."

"Speaking of," said Kareen, "you—"

"Grandmother," Cessilia suddenly interrupted her. "...Not now, please."

Kareen raised an eyebrow. She wasn't mad at her granddaughter for cutting her off, but surprised. Cessilia had always been, by far, the most shy and obedient of her grandchildren, so this was highly unusual for her. After a few seconds, a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"...I think I'll go and check out that Fish Market," she finally said. "Those Dorosef people seem like they can come up with... surprising ideas."

Without giving them the time to say anything, she turned around and left, walking as elegantly as ever despite heading to the Fish Market.

Cessilia and Ashen watched the older woman until she was completely out of sight, then he turned to her, frowning and clearly a bit confused.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Grandmother was starting to be a bit too... inquisitive, about our love life.”

“Hasn’t she always been?”

“Let’s just say I’m trying to manage her expectations for the future,” muttered Cessilia, a bit embarrassed.

“Oh...”

If he had understood, Ashen didn’t say anything. Instead, he gently took her hand, rubbing his thumb on her skin, and tilted his head.

“So you really do like my new haircut, huh? That look you gave me just seconds ago...”

“I just need a bit of time to get used to it!” Cessilia protested, embarrassed.

“This is really different from before...”

“But you really, really like it,” he chuckled, teasing her.

“Stop it...”

Cessilia walked away to avoid his amused eyes, but as their fingers were still interlaced and neither of them loosened their grips, Ashen followed after her, a smile stuck on his lips. For a little while, they walked, in a different direction from the one Lady Kareen had taken, of course. They simply strolled along the river, holding hands, watching the Capital get back on its feet.

“I feel a bit guilty, not helping out,” muttered Cessilia, after they walked by another group of children busy carrying little water buckets to their family.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure we will be busy soon enough,” sighed Ashen in response. “Plus, with everything we went through, you and I both earned a little break, don’t you think?”

Cessilia nodded. It was in her nature that she couldn’t help but want to do something, somehow, to relieve those people’s burden. She tried to fight that feeling by reminding herself that neither she nor Ashen were completely healed. And he was right; they would both be the busiest getting this Kingdom back in order soon. For those people, it would perhaps be a matter of just days before they could resume life as it was, but for the two of them, nothing would be like it had been.

“...I’m curious,” she whispered after a while, “about how it will turn out, in a few years. This Kingdom. You and I... which direction we will take it in.”

“Do you have an idea in mind?” he smiled.

“A few... I don’t want to do things like in the Empire. I’ve only been here for a short while, but... it’s clear the heart of this Kingdom is so different. The people are different. That’s how exciting it is. We could go in so many directions.”

She smiled, trying to envision that future. Next to her, though, Ashen’s smile gradually lessened, and he frowned, visibly absorbed in his thoughts. He suddenly stopped, surprising Cessilia as they were on a quiet street, without anything special around. Ashen looked down, seemingly conflicted.

“Cessilia... are you sure you’ll be alright?” he suddenly asked.

“What do you mean?”

“If... If you stay here, if you marry me, and become the Queen... It will be hard for you to visit home. Maybe not now, but as time passes, it will get harder to go back. You won’t be able to go there very often, even riding your dragon. Your brothers and sisters probably won’t come often, either. I’m worried you might... get lonely, and one day, regret it.”

Cessilia was surprised. So that was what he had been so conflicted about... Ashen, who had finally stopped pushing her away, was now even more afraid of her choosing him. This man... Cessilia couldn't help but fall for him a little more. She liked how he said what was on his mind, but that mind was needlessly thinking and worrying too much at times. Still, she tried to think about it seriously. She knew his worries weren't completely baseless.

"...Would you rather I don't stay?"

She saw the utter pain on his face, for just a split second. Then, he took a deep breath, seriously pondering her question, and eventually, he nodded, very faintly.

"I think... as much as I want you by my side, I would regret binding you by my side, if you ever come to be unhappy about it. I have spent... years wanting you by my side, thinking I would do absolutely anything to get you in my arms, to make you my woman, but now... I realize that was my one-sided, selfish thinking. I barely got to experience having my family around, but the pain of their loss was too hard. If you ever come to regret choosing me over your family, I would be the first one to regret it. I don't... I don't want you to have to choose, and I hate that you might come to regret either choice."

Cessilia sighed, and stepped forward. Suddenly, she slapped Ashen's cheeks between her hands, making him grimace, but forced him to look at her, her hands still cupping his face.

"Ashen. You are thinking way too much," she said. "Just stop. I understand what you are worried about, but I am a grown woman. I know exactly what I am doing staying by your side. Firstly, do not underestimate my Cece, she will fly me back to the Onyx Castle whenever I feel like it without issue. Secondly, even if I do get busy here and see my parents less often, so what? It won't make me bitter. I will look forward to being reunited with them even more! ...Do you know how my mother can keep working at the palace, away from my dad?"

"How?"

“Because she knows that no matter the distance, my dad’s feelings for her won’t ever change. Even if they miss each other, that’s only because they love each other that much. They even enjoy sending each other letters during those times, and they are still very much in love after spending a month or two apart. They don’t have any issues sending us away either, as long as we’re safe and happy. My little sister often sneaks out and disappears for a week or two. My parents even hide away from us to have some alone time sometimes, they are a couple after all. ...I want the same thing, Ashen. I want to visit my family when I miss them, but I also want to be busy and happy with you. If I see them less, that means that I’m busy here. I don’t want to stay at home being Daddy’s princess! ...I want to be my man’s Queen.”

She smiled and tilted her head. This time, Ashen was the one who blushed, and had to look away, embarrassed. He grabbed her wrists to gently take her hands off his face.

“...I guess I’ll have to keep you happy here, then,” he said. “If I don’t want... Daddy to pay me a visit.”

“Oh, he won’t need to,” Cessilia chuckled. “You should be the one to come to the Empire, sometime.”

Ashen grimaced. Perhaps it was a bit too soon for him, but Cessilia had no doubt the time would come when she would see Ashen and her father sitting together again, and chatting around the fire, a cup of wine in their hands.

“...One day,” he finally muttered.

Cessilia smiled. Ashen had come a long way already, so it would take just a bit longer for him to finally heal from his past. And she felt like that truth was real for her too. While in the Eastern Kingdom, she had already overcome quite a lot. Now, and with Ashen by her side, they would take their time building this Kingdom back up, and taking care of each other, paving the way for the future.

Ashen smiled again, and stepped forward, kissing her forehead.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

“Well, my cheeks hurt.”

“Oh, sorry... I forgot I’m... a bit stronger than you.”

Ashen chuckled, and took her hand again to slowly resume their walk.

“I’ll survive that too. I need to toughen up if I want to be worthy of a dragon and her mistress.”

Cessilia rolled her eyes. As if he had ever been unworthy. The truth was, she was probably the one with a lot to learn. Becoming this Kingdom’s Queen wouldn’t be as easy as simply acting kind to the locals and eating fish beignets. She had good relationships with the Clan Leaders, but she knew that the real hardships were to come. Not all problems would have easy solutions, and relying on the Empire’s fortune wouldn’t work twice either. Still, she felt strangely confident about the future already...

“How about you?” she asked.

“What about me?”

“Do you have any visions for the future?”

“Oh... for this Kingdom... I don’t know,” he sighed. “To be honest, I used to live day to day, I never really thought beyond the next week. I never got enough freedom to either. I was always busy keeping the tribes from fighting each other and the Clan Leaders from jumping at each other’s throats or mine. Now that so much has been destroyed, I can’t really think of what to do aside from repairs. I’m not a very visionary leader, it seems.”

“Maybe start with one thing at a time... let’s say, the castle. It’s your castle, after all. It will need to be rebuilt too, at least a large part of it... I mean, what we destroyed. What of it?”

“I hate it,” Ashen scoffed. “I never saw that place as my home. More like I was simply there for the sake of being called the King... I never really liked any of it. Except for the time spent with you there.”

“I like the Cerulean Suite.”

Ashen nodded.

“We can keep that...”

“We can do more than keep that,” Cessilia chuckled. “Ashen... your Kingdom is so reliant on everything coming from the sea. How about we rebuild the castle to that image? Let’s make it a beautiful place, with so many seashells no one will be able to count them all. Colored glass, sandstone, corals, and maybe even nacre. Let’s get the artisans of your Kingdom to do their very best and make that place a real palace, and a real home... After all, that’s where you and I will live. With our own family.”

To Cessilia’s surprise, that last sentence made Ashen unexpectedly smile. She could see his eyes lighting up at the idea, as if she had just unlocked a precious little thought in his head.

“I thought you... Weren’t ready for children yet?” she boldly asked.

“I wasn’t. Not until recently... Maybe you convinced me, and your family inspired me. Well, we can take it slow, so I can learn... One at a time. Three or four children would be good... But that’s only if you want them too, of course!”

He had added that last bit urgently, with that worried expression back again, as if just realizing he might be putting pressure on her. Cessilia smiled and nodded.

“I do want children too,” she said. “How wouldn’t I want them? But... maybe not right away. Let’s give ourselves a few years so the castle can be rebuilt and ready for them, and our Kingdom back on its feet too.”

Ashen nodded, but to her surprise, she saw a hint of disappointment in his eyes. He really wanted children... It was a good surprise to her. Cessilia thought that maybe she’d have them a little bit sooner than that, then.

“...Let’s go somewhere,” suddenly said Ashen.

He stopped walking, and wrapped his arms around her, visibly excited.

“Somewhere?”

“On a date,” he smiled. “Just you and me, while everyone is busy. After this, how many times will we be able to get away and fool around, just the two of us? I want to take you away, now, while no one’s watching and have you all to myself.”

“But where? The castle is busy, and the cave will be submerged at this time...”

“I have another idea,” he chuckled. “Can you call Cece? We’re going to need a bit of a ride...”

Of course, Cece was only too happy to answer the call. The majestic Silver Dragon appeared flying high in the sky, making Cessilia wonder what her friend had been up to so early in the morning. Had the dragon been extinguishing fires all night, or simply watching over the Capital? Maybe the dragons had enjoyed a late morning hunt together, before Kian, Krai, and Roun had been taken back home by Kassian. Cessilia realized, for her, home would be the Eastern Kingdom from then on... It was a bitter-sweet feeling. She’d never stop loving the Empire she had grown up in, but she had a lot of love to grow for the Eastern Kingdom as well. Especially if she got to shape it to her will, along with Ashen.

Cece began to dive, but fast, very fast. Seeing that the dragon wasn’t slowing down at all, and diving right in their direction, Ashen and Cessilia exchanged a worried look. Cece definitely had seen them standing there, right? Yet the dragon kept flying down, faster and faster, its silver tail whipping the air excitedly. Understanding at the last minute, Cessilia and Ashen suddenly grabbed each other and crouched down. Cece flew just an inch above them, and dove into the sea with a loud splash. A wave as big as the dragon washed over the sidewalk, rendering not only the two of them but all the people passing by completely drenched in sea water.

“Cece!” Cessilia exclaimed, shocked.

Next to her, Ashen was already laughing his head off, holding his ribs. He was also completely drenched, but absolutely fine with the dragon’s playful joke. The dragon, who had disappeared under water, suddenly

popped its head out of the water, with those big ruby eyes pointing at them, a hint of mischief in them.

“This isn’t funny!” Cessilia protested.

In response, Cece spat another little jet of water from her mouth at her, but Cessilia jumped back just in time.

“Dran’s been grounded for less than that, Cece, you know that” Cessilia told her dragon, squinting her eyes.

However, Cece blatantly didn’t care, and kept happily swimming in circles in the water. The silver body was making little hoops under and above water, in a snake’s fashion, and was gathering a lot of attention too. All the people who had been doused before were now curiously staring at the gigantic dragon, having forgotten about their earlier protesting. Ashen stepped forward first, standing on the edge of the sidewalk, to face Cece with a big smile.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “There’s nowhere big enough to keep you grounded anyway, girl.”

Cece happily chirped, a strange sound that was a half growl, half high-pitched scream. That was the first time Cessilia heard her dragon make that sound, but no doubt it was all for Ashen. Having his attention was already making Cece happy, the dragon completely smitten with him. Cece approached, and Ashen put his hands on the dragon’s face with a smile. Despite Ashen having rather big hands, Cece’s face was still pretty large, making even him seem small. He scratched the dragon’s silver scales, which made it swish its tail happily in the water.

“Can you let us ride?” Ashen asked with a smile.

Of course, Cece happily answered, and turned around for the two of them to climb on the floating part of the dragon’s body, just behind the head. Cessilia sighed. She felt like Cece would always get away with things as Ashen was ready to spoil the dragon anytime... He sat first, and then extended his hand for her to take and climb behind him. By then, there was a whole crowd assembled on the bay, watching the King and his lady

ride a dragon away from the shore. Cece happily swam away without Ashen even giving any directions yet.

Cessilia didn't dare to look back. For sure, Tessandra would learn of this somehow and scold her later about running away from all that needed to be done downtown... She couldn't help but feel unapologetic about it, though. In fact, it felt nice to just run away with Ashen and Cece, get away from all the chaos and commotion, and simply ride the waves, leaving behind all the troubles they would go back to later. For now, it seemed like they were free, swimming off from the world, into the unpredictable sea and its unruly waves.

They rode for a while. Cece seemed to enjoy the trip as much as they did, swimming effortlessly against the waves, and listening to Ashen's simple directions at times. The dragon would sometimes even dart its head to snatch a fish out of the water, and happily snack on it. The journey itself wasn't that long, and neither Cessilia nor Ashen said anything at all, both keeping silent and simply looking around. It was quite a unique feeling to be riding not in a boat but on a dragon above the water surface, their feet in the water at times, and being carried away from the land. Cessilia spotted bold fish swimming close by, unaware of the predator, and even bigger creatures that appeared on the horizon, smaller than Cece but still big enough to impress. She wondered if the Dorosef fishermen got this amazing show every morning at dawn. It probably wasn't as peaceful and relaxing, though. She kept hugging Ashen from behind, not because she needed to hold on to him, but simply for the pleasure of sharing that moment with him. She silently hoped that they would take small trips together like this even when they got busier and older...

For a while, she wondered where they were going, especially since Ashen seemed to be giving rather precise directions. Then, she finally saw a piece of land, far ahead, popping up on the horizon. Cessilia was surprised. This island was so far away, they couldn't see it from the shore... The closer Cece got, the more she also realized that part of the reason was because the island itself was quite small. It was about the same size as the Central Plaza, so Cessilia could still see both ends as Cece reached the shore. The

dragon climbed on the beach, visibly curious to explore as well. Ashen and Cessilia barely had time to get off before Cece ran away, dashing between the trees. From the way her dragon was excited, Cessilia guessed it had spotted some prey to hunt... Soon enough, they only saw a silver tail, then nothing. She chuckled. At least Cece would stay entertained while the two of them enjoyed their little date.

“Another surprise?” she asked Ashen, a smile on her lips.

“It’s a place I’ve always been curious about,” he confessed. “This island is a bit of a local legend... They say fishermen bring their lovers here.”

“Oh, really?”

Cessilia looked around the island, surprised. She could see why. This place was so beautiful and quiet. It felt different from the mainland. The beach was full of white sand, and thousands of those gorgeous seashells she loved. There weren’t enough trees to call it a forest, just a few scarce ones, but a lot of green bushes and wild plants growing everywhere. It had many varieties she had absolutely never seen before, and if she wasn’t on a date with her lover, Cessilia would have definitely wanted to explore more... However, Ashen gently grabbed her hand, and they began strolling along the beach together, a strange and shy feeling growing between them. Cessilia was curious as to why he had brought her here, but she didn’t want to rush him.

“Are you sure we’ll be alone?” she asked.

“The fishermen are all busy at this hour,” he said. “Plus, we would have seen a boat...”

Cessilia had almost forgotten they just had quite a special ride. Indeed, with the size of the island, they would have seen right away that they weren’t alone. She was a bit more surprised about the nervousness in Ashen’s voice though. What was he thinking about? She didn’t ask, and simply kept walking along with him. At times, they heard the excited dragon from the other end of the island, when Cece wasn’t suddenly jumping out of nowhere to run back into the sea chasing water prey. Cessilia was happy to see her dragon having so much fun. For sure, her

Cece deserved to have all the fun possible, and catch up on everything those years in the lake had taken away...

“So it’s your first time here too?” she asked Ashen after a little while.

“Yes,” he nodded. “I just heard about this place so many times... especially when I was a child. I used to listen to the fishermen’s stories, but this was the one place they always talked about to woo the ladies. They said if a fisherman took a woman to this island, it was with the intent for her to become his wife.”

Cessilia’s heart skipped a beat. Was that why he had brought her here...? To reaffirm his feelings? They had spoken so many times about her becoming his Queen now, but hearing him say the word wife had a surprisingly different ring to it. She felt her cheeks get a bit warmer, and Ashen’s fingers tightened around hers. He suddenly stopped walking, and she heard him take a deep breath before he turned to face her, looking serious like never before.

“Cessilia... I know we agreed for you to become my Queen and everything, but... I also wanted to let you know, I won’t just treat you like my Queen. I want you to be my wife, my one and only wife. There won’t be any more talk about concubines, favorites, and mistresses. Never again, not in my Kingdom. I will abolish the rule about the King being allowed as many women as he wants. I don’t want you to be my favorite, I want you to be my one and only woman consort.”

This time, Cessilia was properly stunned. So this was what he had been thinking about all this time? She had come here as a candidate bride, but all that fighting between women had been a race to become the King’s Queen, while most weren’t interested in anything but the position itself... In the midst of this, Cessilia had come, with her unwavering feelings for Ashen, and claimed the King’s heart for herself anyway. He was right; she had never aimed to be the first, but the only one in his heart. She wouldn’t have tolerated any other woman in his bed, and she couldn’t be like Jisel, ready to close her eyes as long as she kept the position. Cessilia cared little about becoming Queen. What she truly wanted was to be this King’s wife... and she would have wanted Ashen, nobody but Ashen, even if he

had been a fisherman, a soldier, or any common man. He was no prince when she had fallen for him, and she had never seen him any other way.

Right then and there, she could tell they were really just a man and woman, a couple like any other, on a pretty island, just the two of them. Ashen suddenly took a deep breath, and put a knee down in front of her.

“Ashen, what are you...?” she gasped.

“There’s an oath knights make to a lady or a master,” he said. “I want to make an oath to you, Cessilia... I promise, from this moment on, I will never look at another woman the way I look at you. I swear I will never make another woman more important than you are to me. I swear I will never take another woman into my bed, or to be mine. I only want you. I’ve always wanted you, just you. I’ll be the most satisfied of men if you’ll make me your man too. I would do anything, absolutely anything, to make you happy as my wife. I will never let you feel jealous again, if you’ll let me take your hand. If you’ll marry me.”

Cessilia had tears in her eyes, and that terrible urge to cry. She had always been his, but Ashen’s oath was beyond all she could have hoped for. She loved him so much at this moment, it almost hurt her poor heart. She couldn’t handle the turmoil of emotions. She was happy; undoubtedly, endlessly happy.

Before she could think of an answer, Ashen took out a little box. She had no idea he was carrying this on him, or even how he’d hidden it all this time. The box was about the size of her hand, very simple and wooden, but when he opened it, Cessilia’s jaw dropped. A marvelous piece of jewelry was beautifully displayed inside. It wasn’t a ring or a bracelet, but something combining both. She immediately recognized the peculiar and beautiful shine of nacre pearls, assembled in waves and lines, shining with the most beautiful colored shades under the sunlight.

“Ashen... that’s...”

Without saying a word, looking quite emotional himself, he helped her put it on. He first put the golden bracelet on her wrist, and pulled the complex tangle of nacre pearls to cover the back of her hand, before

putting the other end of the jewelry, a golden ring, on her finger. It was a beautiful, delicate piece. Cessilia realized, through the unique shape, the nacre beads were actually sculpted and expertly interlaced to replicate the appearance of dragon scales. They undulated with every movement, and were tightly bound in little waves. The nacre pearls shone iridescent, reminiscent of the beautiful columns in the Cerulean Suite. The jewelry had been beautifully crafted, looking simple, feminine, and delicate on her hand, without being too much. The contrast of the iridescent white pearls against her bronze skin was making it all even more perfect. The gold ring and bracelet seemed to be only beautiful accessories to this uniquely crafted piece. Cessilia was genuinely speechless. This jewelry seemed to be perfect, and... made for her.

At a loss for words, she glanced at Ashen, who smiled.

“You like it?”

“I absolutely love it,” she muttered. “Ashen, it’s beautiful...”

“I heard you loved nacre the most,” he smiled, relieved, “so I asked them to focus on it more than the gold.”

“But when... Just how did you...?”

She couldn’t understand. Gold was incredibly rare and valuable in the Eastern Kingdom. One piece alone would be worth so much, and he had found enough to make both a ring and a bracelet. Not only that, but the nacre piece was clearly designed for her...

“The gold is actually... something I took with me, when I left the Empire,” he confessed. “It bothered me for a while. It was a simple gold bracelet your mother had given me. I think back then, she already knew it was worth a lot for an orphan of the Eastern Kingdom. I took it, but I could never sell it. A part of me felt like I didn’t deserve to use it. At the same time, I kept it as a memento, and just in case I would need it someday. When it became clear that you’d stay, I figured it would be a good way to give it back. So, when I heard your friend mention you loved nacre from the Cerulean Suite, I secretly asked the daughter of the Sehsan Tribe to help me with it.”

“Lady Bastat?”

He nodded.

“I asked her when we were busy with the flood, not knowing how long it would take, but to my surprise, it was finished quickly last night... I went to get it this morning, right before I joined you and Lady Kareen.”

Cessilia could barely believe her own ears. This had been in the making for so long already? She glanced at the piece of jewelry again, trying to repress her urge to cry. She absolutely loved it. It was unique, and looked both beautiful and strong, like her.

“Get up,” she muttered.

He obeyed, a bit surprised, and Cessilia immediately jumped into his arms, hugging him tightly. Ashen chuckled, and hugged her back.

“I’m happy you like it.”

“Of course I like it... You had it made just for me. Thank you...”

She raised her head to kiss him, and they exchanged a long, deep kiss. Cessilia felt the salty taste of her tears in their kiss, once she couldn’t hold them back anymore. She had never realized it was possible to cry this much out of happiness. She felt like her emotions were physically overflowing, pouring everything into that kiss with Ashen. She had never felt so complete, so confident and happy. Whatever came their way, she knew she’d be able to face it with Ashen by her side. It didn’t matter how many injuries and scars the two of them carried, as long as they’d stick together. That was all she really needed.

After a little while, their lips parted, leaving Cessilia almost dizzy, her cheeks red and hot.

“So... that’s why you brought me here?” she asked, trying a bit shyly to change the topic.

“Not exactly.”

She frowned at his answer. Then, to her surprise, Ashen gently pulled her toward the calm waves. Cessilia followed his lead, until they were both in the water up to their knees.

“What are we doing?” she chuckled.

“Don’t you love swimming the most?” He smiled. “I thought you’d like it here...”

“But the water’s cold.”

“Not for you.”

To her surprise, he suddenly took off his cloak, tossing it onto the beach, and walked deeper into the water. Perhaps because it was a bit cold, his abs seemed tighter than usual, and more than satisfying to the eye. Soon enough, he turned around, water up to his bare waist, and gave her a devilish smile, running his hand through his now short white hair. The sight of the seawater running down his body, the sun behind him, was one vision Cessilia never, ever wanted to forget.

Cessilia stepped further into the water, a smile on her lips, dying to join him. The waves gently grazed her thighs, and higher up her legs as she slowly walked up to her man. Ashen was standing there, handsome as ever and calmly waiting for her. In fact, he seemed more serene and handsome as always, his dark eyes riveted on her with a faint smile on his lips. He was stunning with the sunlight coming from behind him, sending gorgeous shimmers throughout his shiny white hair. Cessilia was happy to join him in this peaceful setting. The water reached up to her waist when she finally took his hand. He pulled her against him, with a playful expression, his naked, wet torso against her. Cessilia smiled, putting a hand around his nape. He was even more handsome up close... Without the two of them exchanging a word, she slowly brought her fingers, a bit of seawater dripping from them, to caress the lines of his torso. His skin and muscles reacted to her cool touch, but he didn’t try to move away from it. Cessilia smiled. That skin was marbled with countless scars, but there was a complex beauty in those imperfections. She loved the touch

of the irregular skin under her fingers... She was almost sure that even blind, she would have recognized that pattern by heart.

Ashen gently grabbed her hand, pulling her fingers away from his skin. Cessilia chuckled. Was he getting a bit ticklish? His ears were slightly red...

“This reminds me of when we were younger,” he whispered. “We would always sneak out, away from your siblings and parents, to just be the two of us.”

“It was hard to be alone,” she nodded. “...We barely ever got any time to ourselves during the day.”

“But when night fell...”

He stepped even closer, bringing Cessilia’s eyes up to his face, where a nostalgic smile appeared.

“It was easier to spend time together.”

“Under the moonlight,” she whispered. “We’d sneak out to the roof and watch the stars. Or to the forest, and listen to the noises the animals made in the evening...”

Ashen nodded slowly.

“...It still feels almost unreal to be out in the daylight with you like this.”

He gently brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it, closing his eyes as if enjoying this given grace deeply. Cessilia blushed, feeling his lips pressed against her skin, his large hands gently holding hers. Ashen had always treated her so gently, carefully, as if she was the most precious and fragile thing in the world, despite knowing all too well she was much stronger than he was. It was his way of truly showing his affection for her.

Cessilia smiled as he raised her hand, making the jewelry shine when the sunlight hit it.

“...I really love it,” she whispered.

“I’m glad. I can’t promise I’ll give you presents often, but I will do what I can so you don’t miss out on anything.”

“Of course,” she chuckled.

In truth, there was nothing much that Cessilia was wanting more than this. She loved the spontaneity of this gift, she didn’t want Ashen to feel pressure to constantly give her more. She got on her toes and kissed his lips quickly.

“We have a castle to rebuild first,” she said, “and a Kingdom to get back in working order. A bridge to rebuild, and... a new city to plan too.”

He sighed.

“Sounds like we won’t have much time for our escapades.”

“We can always make time,” she chuckled. “We have Cece, and no matter how busy the day will be, the moonlight will still come, every night, to pull the lovers back together...”

“I’d sure love that.”

Ashen pulled her in to kiss again. Their kiss tasted like morning sunshine, seawater, and dried fruits. She caressed his nape and the bushy tip of his hair, unable to get enough of his new haircut. It was so satisfyingly short under her fingers, she couldn’t stop brushing her fingertips against it. While she had her arms around Ashen’s nape, he suddenly put his arms under her butt and lifted her up, carrying Cessilia effortlessly. She wrapped her legs around his torso.

“How am I supposed to swim like this?” she laughed.

“I’ll do the swimming.”

He lowered his body into the water, and gently carried her around. Although she had always loved diving and swimming, Cessilia was quite enjoying this too. It was as if they were floating and hugging, their bodies carried by the sea and rocked by its waves. It was so incredibly calm around them... They could only hear the birds, the sounds of nature, and sometimes, the growls of an excited dragon playing nearby. Cessilia was

feeling quite excited too. The more time she and Ashen spent in the water, the more she wanted to tease him, and not just be carried away. She began to pour some water down his neck, making him grimace a bit, and soaked more of his hair as he kept swimming, unwilling to let go of her.

“Are you trying to give me an extra shower?” he sighed.

“You promised me swimming!”

“Here we go then.”

Without warning, he suddenly dropped her. Cessilia let out a faint scream, but easily found her way back to the surface. She realized they were in deeper water than just before, and had been surprised to find nothing under her feet when she expected to touch the bottom. Looking around for Ashen, she heard his laughter, loud and without restraint. Cessilia bit her lip, and splashed some water his way as retribution.

“Are you mad, my Queen?” he laughed, wiping the seawater off his face.

“You’re so childish at times!” she exclaimed. “You should be worried I could drown you back!”

“I’m at your mercy,” he sighed. “Although, I do think Cece would rescue me. You love me too much...”

Cessilia opened her mouth wide, in shock of how bold he suddenly was, and in a timely manner, Cece appeared right behind him too. The Silver Dragon swam right behind the King, its body pressing against Ashen’s back as if to offer some support, before exchanging a glance with Cessilia. Then, she saw her dragon dive back to disappear underwater again. For sure, Cece had already chosen which side to be on...

Soon enough, she and Ashen began playing in the water, teasing and flirting with each other like they were unruly teens all over again. Slowly but surely though, they were getting closer to one another. They went from splashing each other with water to more handsy games, trying to steal a kiss from one another without drowning in the process. The excitement was subtly evolving into something more sensual. Their skin got warmer, the space between them getting less and less, and their hands couldn’t stay

off one another anymore. Their kisses got a bit more savage, needy, deep. Cessilia felt the heat rising inside, and Ashen's hands on her were getting more invasive too. He grabbed her hips again, moving up under her skirt, caressing her skin and teasing her. She was almost riding his leg, and the proximity of their lower halves was getting hotter too. Above the water surface, their lips could barely part anymore. She felt his fingers in her hair, going down her back, caressing her nape and holding her close. Soon enough, he pulled down the top of her dress, revealing her breasts, the extremities perking up from the heat or cold, she couldn't tell. Ashen's lips went down to kiss, gently bite, and fondle them. His mouth on her skin was making her even more hot and excited. He kept teasing her, above and below, and Cessilia's breathing was getting erratic. His tongue on her skin was so hot, and sexy... She gasped when his hand caressed her between the legs. Her thighs were already feeling so tense and hot, but this was taking it up another notch.

While she still rode him, Ashen suddenly pulled her up once again, carrying her back to the beach, out of the water. She realized the sun was getting high and hot as its rays hit her skin. Ashen walked back almost to the line of trees, and put her down for just a second. They threw their clothes under them, and Cessilia pushed him down, his butt hitting the fabric first. Before he could say anything, she sat across his lap, resuming their kissing. He didn't seem to mind at all. Their kissing became more passionate now that they were both completely naked, hot and dangerously close to one another. She was already right above his manhood, but Ashen's hands went back between her legs first and resumed the teasing, sending shivers of excitement throughout her body. Cessilia could feel the excitement rising, her desire building in her lower stomach. She tried to keep up with the kissing, a hand on Ashen's shoulder to hold herself, but she wanted it. She wanted to feel him inside her so badly...

“Cessi...”

She went down, slowly, letting his hard member open her up again. Ashen let out a hoarse groan of satisfaction, and his hand squeezed her thigh a

bit tighter. This was probably unbearably slow for him, but she loved the slow grinding inside, as their bodies readjusted to one another. This time, it felt a bit easier, more natural. Cessilia pushed until Ashen was so deep she could push no further, his member filling her to the brim.

“So good,” he whispered against her ear, caressing her neck.

She nodded faintly. She was riding Ashen, and they were both naked in the open, but she had never felt more confident, safe, and loved. Each of his movements was a caress meant to confirm his love for her. He adjusted their position a bit, making it easier for them to pleasure each other. The slightest move made Cessilia moan. He kissed her cheek, again and again, as if to soothe her, letting her decide when they'd move. There was no hurry now that their bodies were united, and already eager for more. They kissed deeply, and at some point, Cessilia began to gently undulate her body, at a slow but pleasant rhythm that woke more sensations in her. She had a hunch this would become her favorite position. Especially because Ashen had all the freedom to move too... and he didn't wait long. After just a few more seconds, his hips began answering her movements, taking her a bit deeper, making her cry out more, wanting more.

“Ha... Ha... A-... Ashen...”

He kept kissing her cheek, or breathing against her temple, their faces so close they could feel each other's excited breathing. His hands on her butt got a bit more impatient, and Cessilia felt him push farther and farther in, making her tremble and cry as he accelerated. She liked to be dominating, but Ashen's restlessness was just as pleasant. He was like a hungry beast unleashed, slowly losing control of his desire, getting a bit more brutal and demanding. Cessilia was growing to like this. Trying to ignore how unfamiliar and embarrassing her own voice was, she leaned back, allowing him to get deeper, focusing on the sensations of him ramming into her, the depth he reached, not quite able to catch her breath.

“Cessi... Cessilia...”

Her name with his hoarse voice was an enthralling combo. She wasn't very experienced in sex yet, but she did want to learn its secrets, to become

better at it, to entice her King more and more. She could feel what so many women felt in becoming a man's mistress... This desire to submit them to this pleasure, and bind them with their bodies. She wanted to become the one to bring him that pleasure, to make him intoxicated with the chemistry only the two of them shared. Cessilia was eager to master all the secrets of sex, the very good sex that made one forget everything else...

Ignoring how her voice seemed to get louder, raspier, and sexier, she began to accelerate her hips with the sounds of their skin slapping against each other.

She could feel the exquisite sensations from their wild love-making, Ashen's rod feeling bigger, his large hands grabbing her skin and pulling her even more forcefully against him. His bestial groans were exciting her the most. She pushed him down, completely toppling him, her hands fiercely grabbing his shoulders to hold herself up; he wasn't defeated just yet though. His hip thrusts were getting even wilder under her, making Cessilia cry out louder each time their bodies brutally collided again. She felt it. The faint tickle to let her know her release was coming, that wave building up in her lower stomach that was just waiting for the right moment to let go.

"A-Ashen... Ha... Ashen!"

As if he'd understood, he accelerated too, his groans getting louder, his hips accelerating again for the last sprint. Cessilia lost control before him. She felt her whole body tremble, while Ashen was still thrusting in, sending dangerous waves of pleasure, one after another, throughout all her limbs. Her voice was cut off from the mind-blowing sensation, and for a second, all that remained was Ashen's final groans, before he got his release too.

It felt like an eternity before Cessilia managed to calm down, her body still tense, hot, and strange. Her breathing was completely out of control, but she suddenly chuckled, unable to control herself. Under her, Ashen suddenly tensed up.

"Oh," he groaned. "That was one dangerous sensation..."

He sighed, and gently pulled out. Cessilia softly fell on top of him, out of strength, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder.

“I can fight a dragon,” she muttered. “So why is this so hard and draining...?”

“I’m glad I’m not the dragon,” Ashen chuckled, kissing the top of her head. “...Also, we can always practice our stamina with time.”

“Are you not satisfied?” Cessilia frowned, worried, and propped herself up on her hands to stare at him.

“My Queen, I am so satisfied, I worry we might have our firstborn on the way much sooner than planned. I’m probably the one who needs to practice my patience if our love-making sessions are so great.”

He chuckled, and after a quick kiss, pulled her back to lay on his chest again, gently caressing her back. Cessilia smiled, a bit relieved. Indeed, this was getting much better each time... She closed her eyes, laying down on his chest, letting the sunlight and Ashen’s fingers gently caress her back. It was strange how long her body needed to get out of this numbness after sex, while some sensations lingered in all of her limbs.

“...Are you asleep?” he chuckled.

Cessilia opened her eyes. She hadn’t fallen asleep, but she had been quite close. She pouted, and lifted her head to put her chin on his torso, and stared at Ashen. She caressed his lips with her fingertips, which he kissed playfully, making her smile.

“Not yet,” she sighed, “but I love this place for sure... We should do this often from now on.”

“We will,” he promised. “I don’t think I can get enough of the sight of your skin under the sun.”

Cessilia blushed a bit. She also liked to see the contrast of their skins against one another. Her and her siblings had come in quite a few different skin shades, and she sure hoped it would be the same for her and Ashen’s children. She loved the idea of filling their world with more colors... She

blushed a bit, thinking about how she could imagine herself with children already. She wasn't sure she was fully ready right now, but she would definitely want a few children.

"...You haven't answered me," he suddenly muttered.

"What?"

"My proposal," he said, almost pouting. "I haven't heard your answer."

"...Do you really need to hear it?" she smiled.

"Yes," he said. "I want to engrave this moment in my mind and remind you of the decision you once made, after some passionate love-making with your future husband."

Cessilia chuckled, and leaned over to kiss his lips, amused.

"Alright... It's a yes, my King. I will marry you."

The smile on Ashen's lips immediately brightened. Cessilia smiled back, and caressed his torso some more with her fingertips.

"...You do know you should probably meet my parents again before that happens, right?" she pointed out.

Ashen's smile melted.

"Come on," Cessilia said. "It will be alright... I won't ask for a big ceremony, I just want my family to be there."

"As if they'd let you have anything less than a big ceremony," he chuckled. "I can already hear your grandmother and aunts protesting. Oh no, my Queen, we will have a nice ceremony, I promise. Maybe not right away, but... in due time, we will have a beautiful wedding."

"Alright, then," she smiled.