

The White King's Favorite

Chapter 33-34

Chapter 33

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 noncitizen

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.

Chapter 34

“...Ashen?”

She quietly walked into the room, looking for her fiancé. Of course he would be there. She saw his tall figure first from the back, as he was slowly rocking from one foot to the other. She smiled. The room was mostly dark, the only light coming from the moon which had risen early. He just glanced back and smiled, and Cessilia walked up to him, amused. He was completely absorbed by the little wonder in his arms. Standing next to him, she wrapped her arms around his waist and put her cheek against his shoulder to stare at the baby too.

“She is so beautiful,” he whispered. “Look at her. She’s so adorable when she sleeps...” There was no end to all the ways he found to compliment their daughter. Cessilia loved the way he looked down on the baby, completely fascinated since the day she’d come into this world. It was as if he was holding the most precious treasure in the world. The baby was just a couple of months old. Cessilia didn’t want to imagine what it would be like once she grew up...

She would have the King ready to fulfill every single one of his dear daughter’s desires. She caressed the baby’s little head and put a gentle kiss on her forehead.

“She sleeps well,” she chuckled.

“Neridie is the most adorable baby,” smiled Ashen.

Cessilia chuckled and kissed her fiancé.

Neridie. That was the name they had finally decided on, a name her mother had influenced. She had offered to name the baby after Ashen’s mother, but he had refused. Eventually, they had agreed on a name derived from the old Rain Tribe’s language, a name that means daughter of the sea. Cessilia found it very befitting of their child. She glanced over to the baby crib, the one her uncle Darsan had made with his own hands. The furniture itself was a work of art, with beautifully crafted driftwood, nacre, and even a little mobile with shiny seashells, tiny dragon plushies, and flowers. In one corner of the crib, a baby dragon was also sleeping peacefully. Just like its owner, the young dragon was adorable. Didi was a unique light pink color, with tiny wings, a long body that was curled up, and silver eyes that shone like little gems, although they were presently closed. Cessilia gently caressed the baby dragon, who growled softly, and rolled onto its side.

“...Ashen, we are going to be late,” she whispered.

His expression fell a bit. Cessilia was always amused to see how heartbreaking it was for him to let go of his precious daughter. With a heavy sigh, he put a kiss on the baby’s forehead, and very gently put her back into her crib. Even if he wasn’t

so cautious, Cessilia was sure their baby would have slept well. Neridie had already proven to be quite an easy baby to take care of; she slept and ate well. Both Cessilia and Ashen had been so baffled with how little the baby cried, but they would often find her already awake in her crib, patiently waiting for them and playing around with her plushies or dragon.

"Sleep well, my princess," Ashen whispered.

Then, he offered his arm to Cessilia, and after one last glance, turned around to leave the nursery. Cessilia waited until

he had closed the door, with unnecessary care, to chuckle.

"She's going to grow up with a terrible temper if you keep spoiling her like this," she whispered.

"She won't," he said. "She's already so well-behaved, it can't be helped that we're doting on her. I'm sure she'll grow as mature as you when she gets younger siblings."

Cessilia smiled, happily. They weren't planning to give Neridie siblings just yet, they had agreed that the baby girl was

their priority for now. As her birth had been quite a surprise and earlier than intended, they had promised to be a bit more careful this time. At least until they felt ready for a second one, both of them sure they wanted to grow the family in the future.

Ashen had been the most nervous about the birth itself. She couldn't help but smile whenever she remembered it. Her pregnancy hadn't even been more difficult than most mothers', yet the father-to-be had acted as if she was having the hardest

time in the world, over caring and watching her every move. Needless to say, she had quite enjoyed seeing him so protective of her, except when it got a bit too much. There had been much to do in the Kingdom, yet he protested anytime she tried to carry

something heavy or got busy... He had even heavily insisted that her mother was around for the birth, and in the end, Neridie

had in fact been born in her father's Onyx Castle, a week after they had gone there to prepare for the birth. It had been quite a situation back then, with the King taking constant trips back and forth, torn between her pregnancy and his Kingdom that needed his attention too. She could easily imagine how her own father had to witness and try to ease Ashen through the long hours it

had taken. Thankfully, her first baby had come into the world without issues, and she had recovered well. Cessilia had thought

a lot about her own birth while preparing, and she could understand all the worries her mother had to go through. She was old enough to remember the birth of some of her siblings, and all had seemed so easy, she had no idea hers had been the most

difficult one... No wonder her father had always been most protective of her as a baby. She had only thought it was because she was his first daughter.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, noticing how she was lost in her thoughts. “I was thinking about Neridie’s birth... She was an easy baby from the start, wasn’t she?”

The mere mention of his daughter was enough to put a smile on Ashen’s face. In fact, she had never seen him smile this much until their baby girl had come into this world. It was clear he was overjoyed to have the family he had longed for... and not just Neridie. Since he had made up with the War God, they had taken many trips between the two countries to visit Cessilia’s family. Any of her siblings were welcome as well, although all of their visits were non-official. On paper, the Eastern Kingdom and the Dragon Empire were just resuming their trades together, and many negotiations were ongoing between the merchants of various trades.

“Of course,” he smiled. “I’m glad she took after her mom.”

“...You think I am the easy one?” she chuckled, pinching his arm.

“No!” he exclaimed, grimacing. “I meant your patience. You’re a lot more patient than I am... I have a short temper. If

our daughter took after me, she’d be a handful, but instead, she’s our perfect little Princess.”

“If you keep praising her like that, she will definitely become a handful, Ashen...”

“It’s alright,” he said, putting a quick kiss against her curls. “I promise I’ll get stricter in the future.”

Cessilia had a hard time believing that. The White King was known to have an iron fist with everyone, Neridie was the only one who could probably get away with anything as an adult... She wrote his words in a corner of her mind, swearing she’d remind him later if needed.

For now, they were simply walking down the stairs, away from their family apartments, and to the lower levels of the castle. In the whole Kingdom, the castle had seen the biggest changes in a short time. Once again, the pregnancy had triggered Ashen to realize the damaged castle was no place to welcome a family, let alone a baby. It wouldn’t have been an issue for the two of them, who were the only permanent residents left with Lady Kareen, but Cessilia knew the castle in its decrepit state would have been far too dangerous for a young child to be in. There were many holes everywhere, broken stones, unstable stairs, and wind coming from all sides. Even if her baby had dragon blood that made her stronger, there was no way she or Ashen would have let their newborn live in those conditions. At record speed, Ashen had prompted the architects to find the best ways to turn the old, damaged, and empty castle into a suitable home for his family. Of course, so much couldn’t be accomplished within just seven months, at least not when the rest of the Kingdom was in the same dire need for rebuilding.

Moreover, aside from the Capital, they even had a whole new city to raise from the ground. Still, thanks to the King himself working hard, as well as the little Princess' uncle and aunt, they had managed to make at least a few floors of the Castle decent enough for their family to live in. They still only had a handful of servants, and no guests were invited aside from their close relatives and the Kingdom's new officials. In fact, this strange atmosphere had even given their castle a new nickname: the Silent Tower. Cessilia couldn't tell if she liked it or not, but the name had already taken root in the locals' minds, so it was a bit too late either way. Strangely, the name that sounded so cold wasn't meant to be negative, it only reflected how peaceful their new home was... and how quiet its residents were, like the little Princess. "Aren't you tired?" he asked gently, looking concerned. Cessilia shook her head. "I'm alright. It's not as busy as it used to be either... You?" "I'll endure," he nodded. She smiled. Indeed, they had been working hard for the past few months, on top of doing their best to raise a newborn. They even had to remind each other to carry Neridie from one place to another. She let out a faint sigh, thinking about all the past months. Strangely, even if the days had been busy and often tiring, she felt like they had gone by in a flash. They had constantly worked hard, knowing there would be easier days to follow, that the Kingdom would heal by itself once they laid the foundations of its recovery. Even now, the reconstruction of the castle was still ongoing, but visible on each floor. No more wind running through the castle, and every bit that had been broken was now replaced by an even more beautiful piece. Some windows had been enlarged, and some walls torn down to make even bigger rooms. Every day, this castle resembled less and less the once corny building she had first walked into, and was turning more and more into a refined, welcoming building. Cessilia had more plans for this castle, like growing more plants and enlarging some of the balconies, but those could wait for later days... "...We should plan to go to the island again," he suddenly said. She turned her head back to her fiancé, surprised. "We haven't been in a while," he sighed. "I miss our time together a bit... and I feel like a bad future husband too. I'm sorry we haven't been able to hold our ceremony yet. I don't want you to think I'm..." "Neglecting me?" Cessilia chuckled. "Pushing back? Stalling? Ashen, we've both been very busy. We even had a child, and it's just been a year since I first came to this Kingdom... I miss our alone time too, but I don't believe for a single second it's your fault. You're busy, we both are. And from what I have seen, you're a very caring dad and a loving fiancé. I have no

doubt it will go on even after we're married. Also, we both agreed to have our ceremony once we're ready for it."

Ashen sighed and stopped walking, holding her hand. He looked a bit worried this time, making Cessilia frown.

"That's the thing," he muttered. "I'm ready. I've been ready to marry you since the first kiss we shared. I feel bad that I can't give you the ceremony you deserve yet. If I had agreed to have it in the Empire, it would already be done, but I..."

Cessilia grabbed his cheeks, amused.

"Ashen. Ashen, look at me. We both wanted to have our ceremony here, remember? I want to marry my future husband in the country he's the King of. Don't let my aunt's words get to you, please. I don't need all the gold and jewels and neverending banquets. I know what you're thinking, but no. You don't need to rival my family's riches. Please... I want our ceremony to be just like us. Nothing showy. I don't even need many people to attend; as far as I'm concerned, our family and friends would be enough. I'm pretty sure most of the Kingdom thinks we're married already, and they are definitely aware we already had a few first nights in the same bed too."

He laughed. Indeed, with the months their citizens had all spent witnessing the Princess' pregnancy for themselves and congratulating her, no one in the Kingdom was unaware of their daughter's existence. Cessilia smiled, and quickly kissed his lips.

"We are already married in my mind," she said. "We've literally done everything but the ceremony, and we even have a beautiful daughter together. In fact, I'm happy we will have our little girl witnessing our wedding someday!"

Ashen brushed his hair back, a small smile gracing his lips. His hair had grown out a little, but he didn't seem to care, allowing his future wife to manage the length. Smiling, he wrapped his arms around her waist and leaned in for a long, gentle kiss. Cessilia gladly returned his kiss, caressing his cheek, her other hand moving toward his torso. He was wearing a thin shirt, which she hoped to take off soon... Indeed, they had such little time for just the two of them together. They kissed until her back leaned against the wall, unable to stop, their lips caught in a delicious spell between them. Ashen gently caressed her waist, hugging her along with that kiss, as if he was trying to hold all of her in his arms. After a few more seconds, Cessilia reluctantly turned her head, leaving his lips on her cheek, to end their kiss.

"Ashen... we really should go. Tessa is going to make fun of us to no end if we're really late."

He groaned at the mention of her cousin, knowing this was definitely true. Cessilia chuckled at his grouchy face. Now

that was something everyone was more used to, the dark and broody King. She put a quick last kiss on his lips.

“Come on, Your Majesty,” she said, pulling his hand. “The sooner we can finish that meeting, the longer we will have to ourselves...”

Ashen’s faint smile reappeared, and he obediently followed his future Queen.

They had stopped very close to their destination, just a couple of corridors away. In fact, it was surprising that no one had seen the two of them kissing. Luckily, only they used the corridor they had come from, the one that led to their apartments.

All of the other guests had come from outside the castle, and thus, from the main entrance. As soon as they stepped in, Naptunie jumped in front of Cessilia, smiling from one ear to the other, Darsan right behind her. “How is she?” she asked right away.

“She’s sleeping,” Cessilia chuckled, “and she’ll probably sleep for a few more hours.”

“Is it alright to leave her by herself?” she asked, worried.

“Didi is sleeping with her, she’ll find us right away if there’s an issue.”

“My dragon used to chew our dad’s toes every time I was hungry!” laughed Darsan. Next to him, Tessandra stepped forward, grimacing.

“That explains the bad breath,” she grumbled. “Dran should really stop eating everything...”

“He’s made progress,” frowned Naptunie. “At least now he’s fishing and hunting for himself, and only twice a day too!”

“Twice a day?” Cessilia repeated, surprised.

“W-well, he was getting a bit too heavy and all the hunting scared the cattle and fish away, so now I make sure he is more reasonable...”

“...A dragon on a diet,” Tessandra rolled her eyes. “She managed to put dumb Dran on a damn diet, and Darsan the Destroyer is now building houses and furniture... Nana, your taming talents will never cease to amaze me!”

“I already told you, he’s really not dumb! He’s just... very stubborn...”

Behind them, a lot of the people present were waiting to greet Cessilia, so she quickly left Tessandra and Naptunie to

argue as always, walking away to greet their guests. Everyone invited to this council had a huge part to play in the future of the Kingdom. There were over a dozen representatives from various clans and tribes, as well as scholars, architects, doctors, guild leaders, and merchants from all corners of the Kingdom. The room itself had only a few seats for the elders who needed it, but the main feature was the gigantic table at its center. On that table, all sorts of maps, plans, detailed accounts, and other reports could be spread out and shown to the others. It had been one of Cessilia and Ashen’s wishes: an open council room, not

restricted to a handful of people anymore, but open to literally anyone who had something to say. Aside from the fact that only adults were allowed in after a quick security check upon entry, any citizen of the Kingdom could come and partake in this council. After the first few councils where only a dozen people had shown up, they had waves of curious citizens who had come to see if the rumor about the councils being entirely open was true, sometimes completely filling the large room, but now they only had the most interested ones. There had been a few arguments, but Ashen didn't need a throne to impose his authority. Just him standing at one end of the table was usually all they needed for everyone present to be on their best behavior with their neighbors.

Right now, though, the whole Council was already busy chatting, some arguing over a plan, or re-reading some accounts, but the King himself didn't have eyes on the table. When Cessilia spotted him, he was standing a couple of steps behind his usual spot and chatting with Sabael. She stared, but the two men seemed to be speaking in a low voice, so she couldn't hear them. Ashen suddenly felt her eyes on him, and they exchanged a glance over the table.

"...What's he talking with Sab about?" Tessandra asked.

"Who knows," Cessilia shrugged. "They have gotten closer."

"Yeah," Tessandra groaned, putting an arm on her cousin's shoulder, "but look at their attitude... Why are they acting so sneaky? Sab definitely avoided my eyes just now!"

Cessilia glanced again toward her fiancé and Sabael. After staring for a bit longer, she had to agree with her cousin.

What were those two chatting about...?

"What was that earlier?"

He froze, trying hard not to look up. If his eyes met hers, he knew she would never stop interrogating him until she got

to the bottom of it. He cleared his throat and continued to look down on the blade he had been polishing. Of course, it wouldn't be so easy.

"What are you talking about?" he asked calmly.

"You speaking with His Majesty earlier. You were both acting sneaky, Sab. What did he want to discuss with you? He obviously didn't want Cessi to listen to it."

He sighed. She was always so perceptive, it was hard to keep secrets from her. He finally glanced up. Tessandra was still staring at him, with that usual little frown between her eyebrows, her lips in a little pout and her arms crossed. She abandoned the piece of fish she had been attempting to prepare for their dinner, leaving the dirty knife planted on the chopping

board. The kitchen counter was an impressive mess, as usual... He smiled. He was starting to really know her expressions by heart, even how she tilted her head like that when she was a bit nervous.

"He had something to ask me," he simply said. "We were sneaky because he didn't want your cousin to hear about it, as you already guessed. Why so curious?"

"Because you're not telling me what it was about although I already asked twice," she retorted. "What is it about Cessilia that you can't tell me?"

"His Majesty asked me to keep it a secret, Tessa."

"From me too?" She raised an eyebrow.

He sighed and put his sword aside.

"She's your cousin, and you two are close. Plus, can't we have some secrets between men?"

Tessandra pouted a bit more, obviously not convinced. She hated secrets, even more so when they were kept from her.

Sabael decided to stand up and walk up to the kitchen counter instead. They had officially begun living together just a few

months ago, and for some reason, Tessandra was extremely stubborn about learning how to cook. He had rarely seen her be so

bad at something, but she really had no talent for cooking, despite each of her attempts being the most serious. He was even

aware of her secretly taking lessons from his sisters, without much success. Sadly, he had actually found out by catching his

siblings joking about it.

Today, like every time before, there was an impressive layout of ingredients, everything still raw and at best, poorly

chopped. Tessandra's talent with a sword did not translate well into her wielding of kitchen knives... She had left the fish

meant to be their dinner in a poor state too after her first attempts to skin them. There was an impressive amount of skin left,

considering how much flesh was gone, although the goal had obviously been the opposite. Embarrassed about her failure,

Tessandra grabbed all the ingredients and tossed them into a large pot before she slammed it on the counter. Sabael grimaced.

"...You know I'm fine with grilled fish," he muttered.

"We're having soup."

She took the pot to the fire pit, trying to heat it a bit before she went back to clean the kitchen counter. Sabael's eyes

were still on that pot, wondering if it was safer to tell her it needed water or to let it burn...

"I'm not prying into your relationship with Ashen," Tessandra suddenly declared, her back turned on him. "I'm not

trying to be a control freak. I was just curious, that's it."

Sabael frowned, and turned his eyes to her.

"I never thought of you as a control freak," he frowned.

“Oh, please Sab, you know I am.”

“Tessa, I’m serious. ...Who said that?”

She didn’t answer, which, for anybody who knew Tessandra, spoke volumes. Sabael walked up to her right when she was rinsing her hands, grabbing her wet fingers to have her look at him.

“Tessandra, I’m serious. Who called you that?”

Tessandra hesitated, avoiding his gaze. After a while, she mumbled.

“...Your sister.”

“Which one?” he insisted. “I’m guessing that it’s not Nana, so which one of the two others? Marcie or Plunie?”

“What difference does it make?” Tessandra sighed. “They both think it! That I’m just some unfeminine, useless, and loudmouthed version of Cessilia. I know your family wanted some cute, docile housewife for you, and they think I’m not the right match. Look at me, I can’t do a single house chore right! I’m only good with swords and my big mouth! What good is it to be strong in times of peace? I hate it, Sab.”

“Tessandra, look at me.”

She reluctantly raised her eyes again, and saw his smile. He chuckled. She was strong physically, but at times, she was the most vulnerable woman ever. He lightly put his hand against her cheek and grabbed her other hand, gently entangling his fingers with hers.

“First, my sisters don’t speak for the whole family. In fact, I’m much closer to Nana, who worships you, and my brothers all adore you too.”

“That’s because I get along with guys.”

“Is that so bad? I grew up used to two of my sisters being the local gossipers. Of course my brothers and I like frank and honest girls more. Yes, you’re loudmouthed, and I love that. I like that you’re going to tell me when something’s wrong, and you’re not afraid to speak up for yourself. My girlfriend is bold enough that she doesn’t need me by her side all the time, she can stand up for herself and wrestle with dragons in her free time.”

Tessandra couldn’t hold back a chuckle at that last line. He was talking about the previous week, when she had quite literally brawled with Dran. It was just a game between them and also revenge for the dragon stealing her fish, but she had fun, while the crowd who had gotten to witness this were completely stunned. However, Sabael’s sisters hadn’t failed to mention how unfitting it was for a girl. Just thinking about it erased that smile from her lips again.

“Tessa.”

Sabael had to insist for her to look up again. That was so typical of Tessandra. She wasn’t afraid to talk back, but sometimes, the smallest remark just got to her. He knew she had been eager to please his family and was doing her best. His

sisters were just nosy and probably upset he wasn't going out with one of their friends instead...

Luckily, he also knew Tessandra enough to know how to cheer her up. He stepped even closer to her, a bit playful, and lowered his hands to her hips. He then put a little kiss on her lips, softly, one that got her blushing. She was really focused on him this time. Her eyes had that little sparkle back, and she combed her hair, her habit when she was feeling a bit sexy. Sabael smiled even more.

"The one thing they are the most wrong about is you being unfeminine. My girlfriend is very feminine and sexy. Do you have any idea how many guys are jealous? I hear every day that if I am ever stupid enough to break up with you, they will throw a party and get lined up."

"They can try," Tessandra chuckled.

This time, he frowned. He could be jealous too, and Tessandra being so popular was perhaps his biggest insecurity. Not only did he not have as much experience as she did, but he often couldn't understand how a girl like her could be attracted to a man as common as him. Aside from his odd-colored eyes, Sabael found himself quite like any guy out there. He had always thought the girls who liked him just found his heterochromia exotic, but he had never imagined he would be able to attract a woman as popular as Tessandra. The two of them were actually quite unaware of their own attractiveness, and too bothered about their partner's popularity...

He wrapped his arms a bit tighter around her, and kissed her for real this time, a bit longer. There was a slight taste of cooking herbs on her lips, which he had seen her try. She wrapped her arms around his neck, grabbing onto him, pushing their kiss even further, passionately. He liked how she was honest about her wants and needs. He caressed her shoulders. He had noticed she had begun to wear more feminine outfits too, and less fighting gear. This one was revealing her shoulders and accentuating her sexy curves. Tessandra was anything but skinny, and he loved both the firmness of her muscles and the softness of her skin. There was always this sort of secretly feminine side of her that his sisters didn't know about, that Tessandra only ever displayed in private with him. She was tough on the outside, and fragile on the inside. She liked to wear feminine dresses, but always wore more uniform-like outfits outside. Nowadays, though, there was definitely some change happening: she had been trying new things. She was putting more effort into her hairstyle, even showing up with ornaments, and she had begun to wear jewelry more often too. He had noticed and complimented her on it every time he felt like it. He found it quite adorable

how she was trying, but also trying not to show it. Then again, that was a side of her Tessandra only showed to him...

While their kiss got deeper, sexier, and wilder, he couldn't help but grimace after a second. One second later, she smelled it too.

"Oh, by the dragon's balls!"

She ran to the burnt pot, while Sabael frowned behind her and opened the windows. Their small house was now reeking of burnt fish and filled with dark smoke. He couldn't help but chuckle upon finding a desperate Tessandra glaring at the burnt pot.

"...I don't understand," she muttered, visibly embarrassed. "I put in all the ingredients on the list..."

"Did the ingredients list include water?"

Her jaw dropped.

"...It needed water?"

"Yes. And probably less fishbones too."

Tessandra sighed, and dropped the pot in the washing basin.

"There goes our dinner," she grumbled. "I should have known."

Sabael chuckled and walked up to her, hugging her from behind.

"It's alright, you'll get better eventually. Also, you know you can ask them to skin the fish at the Fish Market. They'll happily do it for you, or even teach you."

"I'll keep that in mind, next time I feel like slaughtering a stupid fish..."

"I already told you I can do the cooking," he said, kissing her shoulder. "I'm not the best cook in the world, but I'm pretty confident I can at least feed us both..."

"No, I want to get better at it," Tessandra protested.

He sighed. As much as he wanted to encourage her, he was a bit worried it would eventually hurt her. She was quite stubborn at times...

"You really don't have to, I don't care what we eat..."

"I care!" Tessandra insisted. "What will I do when we decide to have kids, Sab? I can't just feed them fish beignets every day, or rely on you for every meal! I hate that I can't do a single house chore right! My mother always asked my sister instead of me because I sucked at every single thing! ...I don't want to be just a useless woman who can only swing a sword around and open her big mouth. I want to be a good mother, like Cessi. I'm tired of your sisters' remarks and I hate feeling like I'm making no progress at all. I could spend an hour in the training pit and get a hundred times better at sword fighting than I would in a full month of trying to cook! And that's exactly what I've done! Your sisters have tried to show me a dozen times and I can't get one thing right!"

She angrily freed herself from his grip, walked up to the wall, and punched it. Sabael ran after her without a hesitation and grabbed her wrists, putting himself between her and the wall before she could do it again.

“Move,” she said. “I need to vent on something and I don’t want it to be you.”

“You don’t need to vent, Tessa, you need to get to the bottom of the issue. ...This isn’t about my sisters, is it? It’s about your mother.”

She frowned even more. So that’s what it was. She was going in circles and feeling ashamed, jealous of her cousin, her sister, and his sisters because of a few remarks. There was nothing Tessandra hated more than being powerless. Sabael gently caressed her wrists with his thumbs, trying to calm her down.

“...You should ask her.”

“What?”

“Your mom,” he said. “Ask her to teach you how to cook. She knows you better. You should stop trying to learn my sisters’ way, you should learn from your own mother. You’ve only gone home twice and not for long, Tessandra. Go and spend time with your family instead of trying to please mine. I’m sure your mother would be more than willing to teach you if you ask her, but you’re both too stubborn to take the first step. So go and ask her. Perhaps she never asked you because she didn’t think you were even interested in it.”

Tessandra remained quiet for a long minute, thinking. From what he had seen, the one time he had accompanied her home, he had probably hit the nail on the head. Tessandra was incredibly like her mother in terms of personality, yet he was sure that if she asked, her mother would actually help her in any way she could. Being a loudmouth didn’t mean she was always honest or forthcoming about her own wants. After a while, when she was calmer, he moved his hands from her wrists back to her waist, but Tessandra barely reacted to it.

“...You really think she would?” she muttered, her voice so shy like a child.

He smiled.

“I’m sure. If it was your daughter asking you to teach her how to wield a sword, would you help her out?”

She nodded.

“Of course I would.”

“Then I’m sure Lady Missandra will help you with cooking too. So just go.”

“You mean... now?”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “If you borrow Dran or Cece, you could even be in the Dragon Empire shortly after nightfall. I can cover your morning shift, and I’m pretty sure no one will complain about you taking a day or two off to go home, you deserve it. I’ll let Cessilia know, if you’re worried.”

Tessandra hesitated. Obviously, she didn't mind going home, and the dragon ride would be a breeze. She was only uncertain because it was so sudden, but there was no way her parents wouldn't welcome her; her father had even asked her to visit more often multiple times. Sabael chuckled, and put a quick kiss on her lips. "Come on, I'll help you pack. Just consider it a little overdue vacation."

"You don't want to come?"

"No, my love, we can't both suddenly go, one of us has to keep working. Plus, you need this alone time with your mom.

I would have loved to visit them, but this is something you must do for you."

"...Why do I have a feeling you're pushing me out?" she pouted.

"Well, maybe I'm really tired of fish beignets," he chuckled.

She slapped his shoulder, but he only laughed it off, and they both moved to gather a few of her things into a bag. She

really didn't need much to go home, her parents' house still had her bedroom ready for her to visit anytime. He could feel

Tessandra was still nervous while grabbing her few personal belongings, but he tried to comfort her.

"This will do you some good," he insisted. "You know it's not just about the cooking."

She nodded, a bit more determined. This wasn't the first time Tessandra had voiced her insecurities nor mentioned

having children. Her cousin having her first baby had definitely triggered something in her mind, but for some reason, they had

never really talked about it seriously, and she was always dodging the subject when he tried to scratch past the surface. He

knew something was holding her back, and after a while, it had become clear it wasn't something she could resolve here in the

Eastern Kingdom. He didn't need to pry too much into her relationship with her mother.

He knew she could sort it out by

herself, she only needed that small push.

They walked out of their house, and Tessandra glanced up at the sky. It was a perfect, clear night for a ride. She turned

back to him, visibly nervous.

"I won't be gone long," she said. "I don't want to let those idiot guards get relaxed just because I'm not around."

"I don't doubt that for a single second," he smiled. "I'll try to keep them in tight ranks until you come back, so just take

the time you need, alright?"

She nodded, and he stepped forward, putting a quick kiss on her forehead.

"It's going to be alright," he whispered. "...I can be the one to improve my cooking if needed."

She grimaced.

"No, I'll do it. Alright... I'll really come back soon."

"Go."

They exchanged another quick kiss, and Tessandra turned around, walking toward the south, past the bridge, where

she'd probably call out Dran. Indeed, a few minutes later, he saw the dragon's silhouette leaving the Capital's sky.

Sabael sighed, and massaged his neck. At least now, he'd be a bit more free to do what the King had asked him to help with, without Tessandra prying into it... but first, he needed to go to the family house and have a serious talk with his sisters.

"You should have seen the look on Sab's face!" Tessandra exulted. "I had never seen him like this, he ate the whole plate and didn't even leave a single crumb! I could have won a hundred battles and not been prouder of myself. Mom's recipe is dragon-proof, I swear."

Cessilia smiled, happy for her cousin. Since Tessandra came back a couple of days before, she had been looking incredibly happy and energetic. She was now all too happy to tell Cessilia about every meal she had prepared, following her mother's instructions, but seeing Sabael content was probably her biggest reward. For the first time, she was even following Cessilia to her herb garden, curious about which plants she would actually be able to use for cooking. It was quite a big change, and both Cessilia and Nana were happy to witness her happiness first hand. "Did your mother teach you a lot of different recipes?" Nana asked, curious. "You only went back for a few days!"

"I felt bad leaving Sab alone any longer," Tessandra grimaced. "Plus, my parents are always busy, even if they said otherwise while I was over... My mom still managed to teach me about a dozen though. Actually, she said it was the ones she learned the fastest, but she said it's enough to begin with. They are surprisingly easy, and once I master them all, I'll probably be good enough to cook anything and try new stuff. I think I'll do better if I just try to improve by myself now. It's always been the same with training too. Once I get the basic movements, I much prefer to train alone!"

"That's good," nodded Nana. "My mom is a good cook, but she has to cook for too many so she only does the simplest recipes. She always says it's better to fill a stomach with a nourishing and simple meal rather than half-fill it with something too fancy! We always eat fish too, so I think she's just mastered all the ways to cook it..."

"The recipes my mom gave me are more with meat, actually. I'll probably need to do some hunting, but I do want to get better at cooking fish, it's the main staple over here."

"My mom would happily teach you!" said Nana. "She's the best at cooking fish the simple and easy way!"

"With herbs, you can make it even better," added Cessilia.

Tessandra nodded excitedly, and they walked a bit longer through Cessilia's garden. It wasn't as big as her mom's herb

garden back home, but Cessilia was a bit proud of the one she had grown from scratch over here. It was actually open to anyone who came to the castle, so any visitor could come and request some herbs. For now, she didn't have enough that anyone could come and freely pick, but it was her goal to eventually. At the moment, Cessilia was more interested in growing as many herbs as she could, including the new ones she wasn't familiar with before. Her cousins from the Hashat Family had been quite helpful with that. She had gotten much closer with Ishira, who was always happy to give her new herbs when their family got some, or to help her out when one flower was causing Cessilia trouble. It was just a couple of rooms in the castle that she had modified to use like a greenhouse, but there was a lot more Cessilia hoped to do to make everything there sustainable and abundant. Since she and Ashen had decided to open the lower floors of the castle to the public, she wanted to make sure everything there would be helpful in some way. So far, most citizens were too intimidated to come all the way here, but with time, she knew they would come.

"This one?" Tessandra asked, looking at a plant Cessilia had just described. She nodded.

"The fresher, the better. It has a very faint sour taste and will go well with your fish or in any sauce. This plant is safe to use in any meal, and if you cut it very thinly, it makes a nice decoration."

"I see..."

In her arms, Neridie suddenly made a little happy cry, her big green eyes attracted to one of the big and very colorful flowers in the greenhouse. Cessilia chuckled, and kissed her baby's chubby cheek.

"Princess Neridie is so cute!" Nana exclaimed. "I can't wait until she's big enough to chat with us! Oh, I've found more children's books to read to her!"

"She's just three months old, Nana," sighed Tessandra. "You're lucky if she even recognizes your voice."

"I really hope she does," Nana frowned. "I just hope I will be a good godmother for her! I'm going to make sure she's a very cultivated girl, and I'm confident I'll be able to support her in any discipline!" Tessandra rolled her eyes.

"Nana, Neridie won't sit on the throne for at least a couple more decades. Let her breathe until then, you're going to stun her with piles of books at this rate."

"Oh my gods," Nana panicked. "What do I do if she doesn't like reading? What if she hates books because of me?"

"Nana, it's going to be alright," Cessilia chuckled. "Plus, Neridie loves it when we read to her. I'm sure everything will be alright."

“...As long as you don’t overdo it,” muttered Tessandra. “Talking about stunning people, Nana, how is it going between you and Darsan? He’s proposed for the... what, eighth time already? I’m impressed, he won’t give up.”

“I just don’t want to have a fiancé yet!” Nana protested. “This is my first relationship, I’m trying to take it slow... Plus, I’m not really sure Prince Darsan realizes what he’s asking, you know. It’s probably not much for him...”

Tessandra and Cessilia exchanged a surprised look.

“Nana... I think you underestimate my brother’s feelings,” gently said Cessilia. “He’s never been with a girl either. In fact, he’s never shown interest in anyone romantically before. He’s really in love with you, but he might be a bit too... bold with his attempts to demonstrate his feelings.”

“Brazen should be his second name,” scoffed Tessandra.

“I-I understand... but I’m happy to simply date for now,” Nana nodded. “We have a very good relationship, but I feel that... marriage might be a bit too much for me right now. I want to stay a Royal Counselor, and we’re still preparing the public library too, and then there’s the building of the new city taking a lot of my time!”

Tessandra laughed.

“For once, I might feel sorry for Darsan! Nana, I’m pretty sure none of that will have to change even if you get engaged or married to Darsan! He’s not asking for a stay-at-home wifey! It’s Darsan! He’s a caveman, he could feed himself with raw meat every day and be completely fine too! He probably just wants to be able to call you his fiancée or his wife, and boast about it, but I bet he’ll be absolutely fine even if you have him do all the house chores! You already have him wrapped around your little finger. Trust me, the only risk you’re taking is to be called every time he breaks something. But then again, that’s already pretty much the case...”

Naptunie lowered her head, visibly thinking. Cessilia smiled while stroking her daughter’s head. Once again, Nana was overthinking things. She would always be the one to put her responsibilities first, but to Cessilia’s knowledge, her older brother would never have an issue with that...

Cessilia’s eyes shifted to Tessandra with a little smile. Her cousin blushed.

“What’s that look?”

“It’s cute, you’re the one giving relationship advice now...”

“I’m at least more experienced than Nana,” she protested in a whisper, “and I know Darsan too. Things are a bit more complicated with Sabael...”

“You make them complicated.”

“Stop teasing me!”

Cessilia chuckled and turned back to Nana, who seemed a lot more serene. She took a deep breath, followed it with a little nod, and then turned to Cessilia.

"Thank you, I feel a bit better now."

"You're welcome. I didn't do much..."

"Speaking of your man, do you know where they all are?" Tessandra frowned. "Sabael disappeared right after his shift this afternoon, and this is the first time I've seen His Majesty not come to check on his daughter for longer than three hours... and since nothing has collapsed yet today, I suppose Darsan's busy with something too?"

Cessilia shrugged. She had no idea. Her fiancé had indeed disappeared in the middle of the afternoon as well. She

hadn't seen him in a while, not even over dinner, which she, Tessandra, and Nana had eaten downtown while touring around

the marketplace. She turned to Naptunie, and to her surprise, the youngest of them suddenly seemed shy, blushing and her eyes going to the window.

"I-I'm not sure," Nana muttered, lying poorly.

"Nana?" Tessandra insisted, frowning. "...What do you know that you won't tell us?"

"I don't know anything!" she protested. "I-I just followed you here to look at the herbs, remember?"

"You've been stuck to us all afternoon despite always being so busy; that's quite suspicious already, but now you're definitely hiding something, aren't you? What's going on?"

Nana slowly retreated, but Tessandra was not the type to back down for so little. She kept walking up to Nana, her arms crossed, pressuring her for an answer.

"Th-the beach!" Nana suddenly exclaimed. "Th-they had something to do on the beach, they asked me not to tell you..."

The two cousins exchanged a glance. What were their men doing on the beach, when it was almost sunset? They were even more curious now. Like one, Tessandra and Cessilia turned around, leaving the greenhouse without looking back. Behind them, Nana sighed, and glanced at the window again. It was almost time anyway... they were probably ready down there!

Cessilia, still carrying her daughter, walked to the beach with a few questions in mind. She had noticed Ashen acting a

bit differently these days, but she couldn't put a finger on why. He was a bit busier without her knowing how it came about, and

at times, he had seemed to try and hide something from her. She hadn't really paid attention until today. After their swim that

afternoon, he had gifted her this beautiful, blue-green dress that had obviously been made just for her, with thousands of little

nacre beads she loved so much, which matched her hand chain. It wasn't the first time he gave her a gift, but he had seemed

very excited about this one... The dress was incredibly pretty and looked very fitting on her body, with an off-the-shoulder top but long and large sleeves, and a mermaid-like skirt that opened like a flower in bloom at the end. It wasn't a very practical outfit, but it was so pretty, she felt beautiful in it. Tessandra followed her all the way to the stairs that led to the beach, one of the few beaches that the citizens could access when the sea level was low, like the secret cave.

To her surprise, the sun was setting behind the horizon, but aside from the orange, pink, and purple stripes in the sky, there were hundreds of little lights coming from the beach. Cessilia slowed down, feeling her heart flutter. What was going on there? There was a little crowd on the beach, standing still and... seemingly waiting for her. A nervous chuckle escaped her lips as her feet touched the sand. To her surprise, there was Sabael, Darsan, and behind them, more of her family. All six of her other siblings were there, including Kassian holding their younger sister's hand, and behind them... her parents. Cessilia lost her breath, feeling the tears come to her eyes. In fact, she was already holding back a cry. Everyone was smiling at her, visibly amused by her shocked expression, and holding little candles. She smiled at her siblings, but inevitably looked beyond the crowd. There was a beautiful arch of driftwood, vine, blown glass, and flowers standing just before the sea. Underneath it was the gorgeous sunset and Ashen. Already trembling, Cessilia slowly walked up to them, at a loss for words. She vaguely saw Sabael grabbing Tessandra's hand to pull her to the side with them, but Cessilia walked up to her parents first. Cassandra opened her arms, welcoming her daughter.

"Hello, my princess," she chuckled against her ear.

That's when Cessilia finally couldn't hold it anymore, and let out a faint cry. She felt her dad's big hand gently

caressing her head, and she moved to his arms next, feeling him hold her. He kissed her forehead without a word, a faint smile

on his lips. Kairen gently took Neridie from her arms, the baby girl immediately smiling happily at her grandparents. Her baby

seemed incredibly small and cute in the War God's arms...

Then, Cessilia turned to Ashen, shyly walking up to him. She had just noticed the little lines of seashells guiding her to

him, and she found the whole setting even more perfect.

"What is all this?" she asked with a tearful smile.

"Nothing but what my beautiful fiancé deserves," he smiled. "...I wanted this ceremony to be exactly how you wanted

it, and... to be honest, I don't think I can go a single day more without calling you my wife. So I asked for a bit of help from

your brother and Sabael, and we managed to fly your whole family over here, just as you wanted.”

Cessilia was speechless. This was going far beyond what she wanted, what she had imagined. She heard little growls, and all of her siblings’ dragons appeared too, jumping on the beach to play. They probably didn’t care much about the ceremony, but the sight of half a dozen dragons playing on the sand made her chuckle, freeing her from her nervousness.

“...It’s perfect,” she cried.

“You’re due another ceremony at home anyway,” Kassian whispered from the side. She heard Cassandra chuckle. Indeed, the Empress wouldn’t let her first niece’s wedding go so easily... but this was the best ceremony she could want. To her surprise, her other aunt, Phemera, suddenly stepped out, placing a gorgeous veil on Cessilia’s head that matched her dress. Then, her youngest brother, Sepheus, who was just seven years old, ran to her, giving her a bouquet of flowers, before running back to hold Darsan’s hand. On the other side was Nana, her chubby cheeks already drenched with tears.

“...I am only a priestess,” said Phemera, “but I will happily officiate this wedding for my dear niece, if you’ll allow.”

Cessilia happily nodded. Her aunt returned her smile, and took a deep breath.

“At the request of His Highness King Ashen the White, we are here to unite these two beautiful young people by the sacred bond of marriage. Across the lands and the sea, nothing is more beautiful than two hearts that came together despite all the odds, to unite as one. Our brave Princess deserves nothing less than a young King full of bravery as well, and she found him, not once, but twice. You are already blessed with a beautiful child, and I am sure you will find prosperity, with both the moon and the sun as your witnesses.”

Cessilia glanced up. Indeed, the moon was already visible in the sky, while the sun hadn’t completely set yet...

however, she felt like her aunt was referencing her parents as well, as another couple that had come together despite being from two different worlds. Ashen gently took her hands, and they smiled at each other. She hadn’t felt her heart beat so fast in such a long time...

“Now, as your mother’s tradition will have it, let us begin the ceremony... The Sea Ceremony.”

Cessilia glanced back at her mom, exchanging a smile with her. She was bringing her mother’s tradition, but to fit

Ashen’s world... She loved it. Her aunt began reciting, and she looked back at Ashen, their hands a bit tighter on each other’s.

“O God of Water, our ancestors taught us love. Help us teach our children too. We’ll share that love to all of your

children, from all rivers they come, from all seas they come. Let us speak of love, and let our hearts beat together. Let your love flow in our veins and words, for you showed us how to love with your tide. Gather your children together before the sea, gather us, and remind us how to love if we forget. Teach us to be patient, kind, sincere, and truthful. Teach us love, teach us how to cry and pray. Fill our lives with love, water, and grace. O God of Water, your children are thankful today, as with love you teach us the way again. O God of Water, your children will remember your love is patient, kind, sincere, and truthful. We shall not give in to anger, and we shall not give in to evil. We shall not lie, and we shall not betray. Your children promise to remember, each day the sea rises, how love is patient, kind, sincere, and truthful. O God of Water, your love has no beginning and no end. Your love is blind and deaf. Your love is infinite. O God of Water, your children of the rain shall not lie, and they shall not hurt. I will be blind and deaf if I can't see or hear love. O God of Water, your children gather today, in harmony, to love again. O God of Water, hear our prayer. Your children will give up their wealth, their bodies, and their minds for love."

Cessilia exchanged a glance with Ashen, and to her surprise, he began reciting at the same time as her.

"The Sea comes to us blind and deaf. The Sea will witness our love today. I give my wealth, my body, and my mind for this love of mine."

They exchanged a faint chuckle before resuming.

"I will love eternally, in the eyes of my beloved, and in the eyes of the Water God. I swear to keep my love patient, kind, sincere, and truthful until I die. I swear to honor the Water God in every way until I return into his arms, side by side with my beloved."

Cessilia took a deep breath. Her heart was beating like a drum.

"O God of Water, love is infinite. Love is mine. You are mine."

"...You're mine," Ashen whispered, echoing her words.

She wanted to cry, so happy, overwhelmed, and grateful for how much effort he had put into their ceremony. It was beyond her most beautiful dreams. He smiled, and she leapt into his arms, dropping her bouquet to kiss him.

"...I'm guessing that seals it," chuckled her aunt.

Behind them, everyone happily cheered, clapped their hands, and congratulated them.

It was a small gathering for the ceremony, but for a few seconds, Cessilia felt as if she was alone with Ashen. They kissed until they had enough, completely shameless, and full of happiness and bliss. Then, they happily smiled at each other, and Ashen took her hand, gently pulling her

to the side. Cessilia was so drunk on love and happiness, she didn't realize what was going on until she saw Sabael pulling Tessandra into the spot they were in seconds ago, and putting a knee down. Her cousin gasped.

"S-Sab..."

"I'm going to ask it," he smiled, "so you'd better be ready."

"W-w-what? Ready?!"

"Tessandra, will you be my wi—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence before Tessandra jumped into his arms, crying and kissing him wildly, making everyone around laugh. Phemera sighed.

"And that is a yes if I've ever seen one," she chuckled.

"...Too bad her mom isn't here," whispered Cassandra. "She'll never believe me..."

Cessilia was so happy, both for herself and her cousin, she could barely realize everything that was going on. She

turned around to face Ashen, his arms around her waist.

"...I did my best," he whispered. "Your family can only stay one night, but..."

"Ashen, shut up, please. It's absolutely perfect. It really is. I've never been happier..."

Thank you."

They smiled again, and she put a kiss on his lips, completely unable to stop.

She was truly happier than ever. And this was just the beginning for them.

The End