

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 never-ending 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. “Sabaël 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 Sabaël, 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