

Chapter 4

The two Counselors kept exchanging intrigued glances, even as they were leading the way to the Cerulean Suite. There was definitely something going on between the King and the Princess. Was he simply trying to act polite to a foreign princess by giving her the best room in the castle? Was it an attempt to show that they could still rival the Dragon Empire's luxury? No, it couldn't be. Perhaps, if it had been anyone but their King, they would have seriously considered such a theory, but... this was King Ashen they were both thinking about. The cold-blooded, heartless King with no consideration for anyone. He didn't even treat any of his vassals with that much consideration, not even his oldest servants! Why would he suddenly give the best room to Princess Cessilia...?

Neither of them had even been allowed to see that room. The rumor was that it was the most beautiful place in the whole castle, prepared by the previous kings to welcome their favorite wives or mistresses. Yet, rather than that devious, red-haired woman, the King was giving this to a young woman he had supposedly seen for the first time today...? Yassim kept frowning and trying to think, but he was still thinking this had to do with his initial theory about his King and the truth about his death. Unfortunately, it was still way too soon to confirm any of it...

Two young servants were waiting when they arrived in front of the blue gates. In fact, those blue gates were already very eye-catching, painted in a magnetic cerulean blue, with gorgeous arabesques of a shiny, white surface that Cessilia first thought to be some polished marble, but it was shinier than what she knew.

"Welcome, Princess," saluted the two servants, who appeared to be identical twins. "We were sent to serve you."

They were both wearing white outfits, and a bob haircut with bangs, but their eyes couldn't be seen while they continued bowing.

"By whom?" immediately asked Tessa, defiant.

"By His Majesty," answered one of the twins. "The three of us will be at your service from now on."

"Th-three?" repeated Cessilia, confused.

"Yes, Your Highness, our sister is already inside," said one of them, stepping forward. "We shall open the gates to the Cerulean Suite for the Princess now. The Counselors aren't allowed to enter unless the Princess requires them to."

Cessilia and Tessa exchanged a glance, surprised. They were the ones to say if Yassim and Yamino could enter? They were the guests here, and those two old men were obviously Royal Counselors, how could they be the ones to decide whether they could enter or not?!

"Ah, please don't be surprised, my ladies," said Yassim, noticing their confusion. "In our Kingdom, no man can enter a woman's apartment unless she agrees to it first, regardless of his position. The only one allowed to do so is the King, to whom no door shall remain closed."

Tessa made a grimace. That was one distorted way to say things, but she understood the general idea. Basically, just like in the previous ways of the Dragon Empire, any man of noble or Imperial title could take any woman as a concubine. However, the Empress had abolished that rule, and put new ones in place to protect young women against rapists.

"The C-Counselors are allowed in for n-now," said Cessilia.

"Understood," nodded the two servants.

Then, they each pulled one of the doors' golden handles, opening it wide for Cessilia.

She was stunned by the vision inside. This room felt like a completely different world from the rest of the castle. In fact, it reminded her of those magical places described in her books. The floor was suddenly so well

polished that all of the round pieces of rock were completely even and smooth under her feet. She shyly walked in, her heart beating a little bit faster. The room was in the shape of a comma, with a large round area, and a little corner on the left, with a large canopy bed with cerulean blue sheets and light wood. There was another door a bit further on the wall, blue too, but for now, she was too busy processing everything else she could see. The tall columns were supporting a stunning vaulted ceiling, with an incredible mosaic of iridescent, dark little pieces that Cessilia couldn't identify, just like the white one on the door earlier. Moreover, everything was shining incredibly, with all the colors her eyes could catch, reflecting the little movements of the water around her. Similar to what they had seen in the corridors, there were little streams of water crossing the room, all leading to the side opposite the door. And in fact, there was no wall opposite to them. Instead, there were more of those columns, in wide arches with a breathtaking view of the sea beyond them.

Cessilia lost her breath as she walked closer to see. There was a little balustrade made of sculpted redwood to keep her from falling, but as she stood there, it was clear that half of this room was a balcony, with an amazing view of the sea, in which the water streams were falling several feet below her. She could smell the gentle, salty breeze of the sea, caressing her cheeks and freshening up the whole suite. She could hear the waves crashing against the foundations of the castle and going back gently into the large river stream. Her eyes could even spot a colored fish at times, before it quickly swam away. This room showed her the edge of the Eastern Kingdom, beyond the island they were on, the vast sea with no known end.

"T-This is... inc-credible," she muttered, amazed.

"By Glahad's butt..." whispered Tessa, somewhere behind her. "You weren't kidding, this place is gorgeous."

Cessilia chuckled and turned around. Just like her, the two old Counselors looked a bit lost and amazed, gazing all around as well. All the furniture showed great taste and was made in light wood, with pieces of cerulean

fabric here and there. In the morning, she could just imagine the amazing sunrise they would witness that would light up the whole room...

The three servants, obviously triplets, advanced forward to bow to her again.

“I’m Nupia,” said one of them. “I am the oldest of the triplets. The second is my brother Rupio, and the youngest of us is Lupia.”

“Nice t-to meet you,” smiled Cessilia.

“Nice to meet you guys,” added Tessa, putting her hands on her hips. “We’ll have tea, dried fruits, and meat buns for breakfast, thanks!”

“T-Tessa!” protested Cessilia.

“What? I’m starving! Isn’t it their job...?”

“We will bring it right away!” said Nupia with a smile.

Indeed, Rupio and Lupia quietly walked out. The triplets looked exactly the same, had the same black eyes and hair, the same dark skin shade, the same bob haircut and bangs, the same body build and white outfit, and had no distinctive feature to distinguish one from another. They seemed to be young, just at the beginning of their teenagehood, and with their thin features, it was impossible to even tell which of the three was a boy...

“This room was prepared on short notice, Princess,” said Nupia. “If there is anything you dislike, it will be changed right away.”

“Is th-that really alright?” asked Cessilia.

“Of course! All of the candidates were given dedicated servants and assigned rooms. This one was prepared in a rush, but we are happy to do anything you need to make it more agreeable!”

Nupia seemed very enthusiastic, but Cessilia was still a bit taken aback. They had only just landed this morning, and seen the King not an hour ago. This room had truly been prepared in record time...

“Well, I guess we know where we’ll stay from now on,” said Tessa, sitting down in one of the large armchairs. “Now, will you two explain what the heck this competition thing is? Yassim?”

The two Counselors exchanged a glance and sighed, coming to sit with the young woman. Unlike them, Cessilia was still standing, absorbed by the white, iridescent material on the columns. She slowly caressed it with her hands, surprised by how smooth and cold it was.

Tessa didn’t seem surprised by her cousin’s attitude, so the Counselors focused on her. In fact, Yamino let out a long sigh.

“I have to admit, I was shocked to see you after such a long time, Yassim. I really thought His Majesty had killed you, you old fool... but it turns out you ventured to the Dragon Empire, to bring back a princess no less? What came to your tortured mind that made you return like this?”

“I have to apologize to the ladies,” sighed Yassim. “This is exactly as you heard earlier. I... I didn’t lie about being a Royal Counselor, I have been by the King’s side for a very long time. However, I... fell into disgrace a few months ago. I believe the King spared me in the name of everything I taught him over the years and the fact that... I did save him once. However, he banished me from our Capital, threatening that if he ever saw me again, he’d cut my throat. When I begged him to reconsider, he said I could only return if—”

“You brought a new chick for his coop?” scoffed Tessa. “Why Cessi, though? Why come to our Empire? You should have just remained hidden and saved your damn neck!”

“I... I am an old man, Lady Tessa, I do not fear the Goddess of Death. However, I did fear to leave our damaged Kingdom in the hands of an even more damaged man. I believed that... if I could bring the right queen to his side, perhaps, then him sparing my life would have had some sort of... fateful meaning.”

Tessa rolled her eyes, a bit upset.

“You made one dangerous bet, Yassim...” sighed Yamino. “However, I’m happy to see you. To be honest, I was worried about what was going to happen to all the candidates.”

“Aren’t you trying to have your niece become Queen?” asked Tessa, frowning.

“Naptunie is a very smart young woman,” nodded Yamino. “I thought it would be better if there was another alternative among the candidates... However, now that I have seen Princess Cessilia, I will suggest she supports you. Naptunie has little ambition of her own, so I believe she will be happy to support Lady Cessilia if... she wants to.”

All three pairs of eyes turned to Cessilia, who was still absorbed by the ceiling. She had to be listening to them because she was close by, her hands were joined and fidgeting a bit. Still, she took a little breath in, her green eyes still stuck above.

“S-Sir Yassim, what are th-those?” she finally asked.

“The ceiling and the columns are made of nacre, my lady. It’s a material made of polished seashells. The one used on the ceiling is dark nacre, while on the columns and doors is white nacre. It’s considered a precious material here, and used mainly for decorations, dishes, or jewelry, a bit like silver in your country.”

“...It’s b-beautiful.” She smiled.

“Cessi,” pouted Tessa. “You do know this is all about you? What do you think of this competition thing?”

Her cousin finally turned her eyes to them.

“C-Counselor, who are the other candidates?”

“Most were introduced by the s—seven noble families,” said Yamino. “Because of the current situation in the Kingdom, they are all desperate to be the family of the next Queen... and perhaps, get along better with the King.”

“Old Yassim here did mention he wasn’t exactly playing nice,” said Tessa.

Old Yamino sighed, patting his huge belly. It was so round under his white toga, it looked like he was about to pop out of his chair at any moment.

“Did you notice the empty chairs?” he said with a sorry voice to Yassim.

“The Cheshi and Kunu Lords... What happened?”

“His Majesty got extremely mad, just three weeks ago, over an argument with the Kunu Tribe. They were arguing about the battle at the border; as you know, this is still a sensitive matter. The Kunu always refused the King placing the Royal Army there instead of Kunu warriors... You know how proud and violent the Kunu Tribe was. They said the wrong... thing, and the next thing I saw was a bloodbath. He... killed the head and all of the Chieftain’s family. After that, the Cheshi Clan stopped attending as a protest. They were never fond of the Kunu Tribe, but they said the King’s ways couldn’t go on anymore. I can’t blame them... They haven’t attended a single meeting since then, but the King has yet to say anything about it.”

Yassim’s expression had fallen a bit lower at each word his friend said. The old man did look very shaken about the empty seats before. Cessilia came to sit beside her cousin.

“Th-the other f-families?” she asked.

“There are- I mean, were, nine lords, each at the head of a tribe, powerful family, or clan,” explained Yamino. “I myself was born in the Dorosef Tribe, but I renounced my privilege when I became a Royal Counselor.”

“The Yekara Clan is the most powerful,” nodded Yassim. “I’m not surprised they are presenting two candidates. They have many lands and a lot of warriors. They took part in all the previous wars of the Kingdom, and turned on the previous King to pledge allegiance to King Ashen.”

“Sounds like people our grandma would love on her bad days...” scoffed Tessa.

“The Dorosef Tribe is very peaceful,” said Yamino. “They were once travellers, but they settled in the Kingdom as fishermen. They aren’t seriously participating in this, and neither are the Hashat Family; they are too new among the lords.”

“The Sehsan and Yonchaa Tribes are among the oldest of our Kingdom. They are probably participating to try and make themselves more valuable to the King. They are not aggressive, though, so I don’t think their candidates will fight too hard for this...”

“I’m more worried about the Pangoja,” nodded Yamino. “That clan is the richest, and very secretive. They have many businesses all across the Kingdom, a lot of informants, and an eye on all the trades...”

“Now that sounds like my kind of people,” smiled Tessa. “So, if I can remember all those names correctly, we have the warrior Yekara Clan, the Dorosef, Sehsan, and Yonchaa Tribes, that shady Pangoja Clan, the somewhat sulking Cheshi Clan, and the already dead Kunu people... Who am I missing again?”

“The Hashat Family, but they aren’t participating. Although, Counselor Oroun is from that family and nominated his own daughter. The ninth family is the Nahaf, and they also have a candidate. I don’t know them too well, they rose at about the same time as our King...”

“Great, now I’m going to have to take notes,” grumbled Tessa. “What about that red-haired woman? She had... light skin, like me and Cessi. Where the heck does she come from to look like that and act like that? I already can’t stand her attitude.”

Yassim was intrigued too. He hadn’t thought he’d return to see his King had really taken a mistress... He felt horrible about it, after he had brought Princess Cessilia all the way here. That woman was the worst outcome he had imagined in his plan, and he also didn’t like her already... He turned to Yamino, who rubbed his round cheeks with a sullen expression.

“Ah... That Jisel woman, I am not too sure, to be honest with you. I heard rumors about her here and there from the servants, and then I began seeing her in the castle. She’s... just acting as if she had always been here. She greets us, but I’ve never seen her talk with anyone but His Majesty. She’s most often by his side, to be honest. I quickly found out she’s been with him for a while now, but no one seems to know where that woman came from.”

The two cousins exchanged a look.

“M-Mother said there were other p-people from the Rain T-Tribe...” muttered Cessilia.

“Yeah, she and my mom searched for some of them, but she only found a handful of slaves scattered in the Dragon Empire...”

“Rain people?” repeated Yamino.

“White-skinned people,” said Tessa, “like our moms.”

“Oh... I have never seen white-skinned people, but... people like you, I do.”

“Seriously?!” exclaimed Tessa, slamming her armchair and making the old men jump.

“Y-yes,” mumbled Yamino. “W-well... I mean, their skin isn’t as fair as yours, but the Hashat Family’s heir is... definitely closer to your skin color than mine. They haven’t met the King yet, but I met the Hashat’s Lord’s heir at a party not long ago. I almost thought you were his people until Yassim spoke earlier...”

“Hashat,” repeated Tessa, turning to her cousin again. “Hashat, Hashat... Cessi, didn’t Auntie use to sing that old song, when we were kids, remember? She taught us those lyrics from her native language, and hashe was definitely the word for...”

“...It m-means rain.”

The two girls remained quiet for a little while, seriously shaken by that news. They had always seen their mothers trying to find more people from the Rain Tribe who had survived the slaughter three decades ago. Each time they had found other white-skinned women or their mixed children, their mothers were seriously shaken and thrilled. Both Tessa and Cessilia knew how much it meant to find people of that supposedly exterminated group.

“C-can you t-tell us more about th-those p-people? The Hashat Family?” asked Cessilia.

“Of course, my lady,” nodded Yamino, a bit surprised by their reactions. “Although, there isn’t much. The Hashat were never a very powerful family, but they did get more noticeable following the previous civil war. While a lot of our Kingdom was ravaged, their people became famous as miraculous healers...”

Cessilia felt her heart stop upon hearing this.

“Their medical knowledge is the most advanced in the land,” nodded Yassim. “Their tribe went from village to village to help heal the people, and thus, they made a reputation for themselves. They never earned much for it, but their will to save even the poorest of our citizens became well-known throughout the land. It is known that the Hashat will heal even those who can’t pay, as long as no one is hostile to them.”

“Once the war ended, His Majesty rewarded them for their good actions. They were gifted a lot of money, and some lands that had been confiscated, although they decided to remain an itinerant tribe. I believe they have a couple of houses in the Capital, but they never stay long. Only a handful stay to partake in the nine lords’ meetings, but the leader’s heir and oldest son is usually traveling with the rest of their family...”

“It is probably also for their safety,” nodded Yassim. “A lot of people were upset that a nameless tribe suddenly got so much money and land from the King...”

“Well, for once, your King sounds like he did a good thing,” said Tessa, crossing her arms. “But that medical knowledge is something the Rain Tribe was known for. My guess is that the Hashat became so good because they took in some of our Rain Tribe’s people.”

“C-can we meet them?” asked Cessilia.

“Of course, my lady. As I said, their leader resides in the Capital. I can ask Counselor Oroun to arrange a meeting with them; they are very kind people, only a bit secretive, for obvious reasons...”

Cessilia nodded with a little smile.

Yassim was always surprised at how polite, quiet, and gentle the young Princess was. In fact, despite their very brief meeting, he could see a lot of her mother in her. He could easily see why her cousin was so outspoken, in comparison, and always ready to jump to her defense. Despite her size, Cessilia seemed rather fragile on the inside...

“...Do you have any other questions about the other families and tribes, my ladies?” asked Yassim, visibly a bit nervous.

“How will the competition go?” asked Tessa. “I imagine it’s not like there’s going to be a sword fight or something?”

“Oh, no, my lady. In fact, there won’t be any open competition. It’s only about inviting all the candidates, and His Majesty will choose one to be his wife.”

“Nice, so we don’t actually need to kill the others to win?” asked Tessa, raising an eyebrow.

A bit shocked to hear a young woman say such a thing, Yamino glanced at Yassim, his mouth open. Did he just hear this? Yassim chuckled nervously. After all, Lady Tessa was also the War God’s and the Empress’ niece...

Thankfully, two of the triplets returned then, and they had actually already gathered everything Tessa had asked. They poured some tea for all four of them, and Tessa jumped on the meat buns. They hadn’t eaten since leaving that morning, so the four of them gladly ate some breakfast while the triplets happily served them.

“...I want t-to visit the C-Capital, if p-possible,” said Cessilia after a little while.

“Of course!” said Yassim with a smile. “I’ll personally walk you around this morning, my lady. It’s actually a market day, so it will be even more thriving than usual.”

“Lady Cessilia,” said Yamino, licking his fingers after his third meat bun, “I would like to introduce you to my niece, Naptunie, if you’d agree. That

child grew up here in the Capital, she'll escort you as well, if you'd like. I'm sure she will be able to show you the young people's favorite places."

"I'd love th-that," nodded Cessilia.

She had a little smile on her lips that she couldn't hide. Cessilia was a bit impatient to explore more of this Kingdom. In fact, she had never been the adventurous type, and her family had always watched her a bit more closely. She lived her life between the Imperial Palace and her father's castle, sometimes visiting her grandmother too. But she had only accompanied her brothers to the North Camp once, and she rarely went anywhere without her family. She wasn't like Kiera, who couldn't stand being watched and would flee anytime she could. Perhaps because she was the oldest daughter, Cessilia was always very obedient. Only once had she broken the rules. She had betrayed her parents' trust just one time and paid a heavy price for it...

"Shall we start with a tour of the castle?" offered Yamino, patting his round belly. "This way, we can go see my niece, and then you younglings should be off to the Capital!"

"...What about the rest of your, uh... luggage, ladies?" asked Yassim, suddenly remembering the Black Dragon.

"Oh, he'll be back when he's full," shrugged Tessa.

"K-Krai likes to g-go hunting first th-thing in the morning," smiled Cessilia. "He will nap somewhere and c-come b-back later..."

Yassim tried to smile a bit awkwardly. He was a little bit worried as to where the large Black Dragon would set its new hunting ground...

"Oh, let's go now," announced Tessa, standing up and stretching. "I need to walk to digest all this. I'm curious about this castle too. It's so tiny!"

Yamino and Yassim felt a bit defeated by the young woman's honesty, but she probably had very different standards, considering where she came from. Yassim had witnessed himself that the War God's residence was about as big as their King's...

“We can take care of your luggage if you want!” quickly offered one of the triplets, running to the bags they had put down at the entrance.

Before she could put her hands on it, a knife flew right by her fingers, missing them only by an inch. The cutlery stabbed the wall next to her. Nupia froze and fell back in fear, her eyes wide. Her younger siblings, who were respectively holding the teapot and a full fruit plate, glanced at Tessa, both just as shocked.

“If you touch our things, I’ll cut your fingers off,” said the young woman.

“I-I’m sorry!” quickly said Nupia, backing away from their bags.

The two Counselors were in awe. Not only because they had barely seen the action, or that this kitchen knife had been thrown with such speed, strength, and precision that it literally got stuck in a wall, but also because Cessilia had barely reacted to this. In fact, her eyes had quickly gone to each of the triplets before she had taken her teacup to sip quietly as if her cousin’s action was completely normal.

“M-my lady,” said Yamino, a bit confused. “There’s nothing to worry about, all the castle’s servants are trained since childhood to serve well—”

“Th-they are not just servants,” suddenly said Cessilia.

Once again, the two old men were utterly confused, but the young Princess’ green eyes were on the two younger triplets. It was as if her previously gentle gaze had turned into an emerald-colored stare. This time, Yassim could clearly see something of her father in Cessilia’s eyes. She didn’t look so fragile anymore, all of a sudden, but she had the piercing gaze of someone who knew how to watch out for threats.

“I-I am sorry,” mumbled Nupia, bowing again and again. “We are really just servants, my lady...”

“D-do you t-train servants to f-fight?” asked Cessilia, her eyes going to Yamino.

“Of course not!”

“Then they are not j-just servants,” she quietly said.

The triplets kept exchanging glances, visibly confused. Yassim was also trying to understand. Cessilia seemed so sure, but the triplets also seemed genuinely shocked, and the look of fear on their faces too... Still, the young woman was the War God's daughter.

"How do you know, my lady?"

"The b-boy didn't flinch when T-Tessa sent that knife, neither d-did Lupia," she simply said.

Yassim was astonished. He glanced aside, but... indeed, it made complete sense. If the triplets had really been shocked, they would have very briefly lost their grip on the dishes they were holding. The knife had flown close to them and almost injured their older sister, so they should have been at least shocked. Some of the contents of that teacup held on the plate would have been spilled, and those grapes on top of the fruit bowl looked like they were just about to fall, yet still there. If she hadn't said anything, Yassim wouldn't even have noticed their lack of physical reaction, and been floored by their acting. They were both faking their surprise so perfectly, but Cessilia had been able to notice it. Not only that, but... she even could tell those two apart? Since they had left the room and returned together, Yassim just couldn't tell which one was the boy or the girl, but Cessilia obviously had no doubt.

A shiver went down the old man's spine. There was definitely more to that young woman than meets the eye.

Realizing they were discovered, the triplets exchanged glances, and immediately got down on their knees, apologizing together.

"Our apologies for deceiving this Princess! We were told to quietly and secretly watch over the Princess, we would never try to harm the Princess!"

"...Who sent you?" asked Tessa, who was playing with another knife already. "Don't you lie, I'll really cut your tongue if you do. I only need one of you to talk."

"The King, my lady! It's the truth!" quickly said Nupia.

As she was repeatedly bowing and hiding her face, Yassim had no idea how to tell if the triplets were telling the truth, but Tessa and Cessilia were visibly satisfied with that. Tessa glanced toward her cousin and put the knife down.

“K-King Ashen t-told you to p-protect me...?” repeated Cessilia.

This time, she wasn’t doubting the triplets, but there was surprise in her voice. Tessa frowned subtly too. What was going on there... The triplets nodded quietly again, visibly still afraid of the cousin’s dangerous knife-throwing ability.

“...I see.”

That was all Cessilia said, and no one dared to ask anything else. Instead, as she slowly stood up, they all did, and she put back on a gentle smile as if all of that hadn’t happened.

“Is it alright if we g-go now?” she asked Yamino.

“Of course, my lady! Nothing better than a little digestive walk, right?”

“You three are coming with us,” immediately said Tessa, glaring at the triplets.

All three immediately complied and cleared the table in record time while the girls took out their coats.

“Maybe we should wear something d-different?” suggested Cessilia.

She had probably noticed the difference in clothing from the rest of the nobles.

“There will be plenty of clothes in the market if you ladies want to buy something,” nodded Yassim. “They may not be as luxurious as the Dragon Empire’s fabric, but we have some of the best clothing shops of the Kingdom in the Capital.”

“Oh, for sure! Naptunie will happily take you, Princess Cessilia,” nodded Yamino. “My niece loves going downtown.”

Their little group soon got ready to leave the room, and Cessilia did notice how Nupia carefully closed the room behind them and walked back to her, handing her the key.

“From now on, Princess Cessilia, you are the only guest allowed in the Cerulean Room and the only one to decide who will be allowed in or not. The sentence for trespassing is death, my lady.”

Tessa scoffed.

“I hope you’ll remember to let me in, Cessi.”

The two cousins chuckled but did not mention anything about allowing the older Counselors in again. Instead, their little group walked out and back into the corridors. This time, Yamino was leading them, while the triplets followed behind. Cessilia was a bit excited to get out of this castle. She found this place a bit sad and stuffy; most of the corridors were bare and the atmosphere heavy anywhere they went. The few people they walked into quietly bowed to their group and disappeared, out of the way. Either the news of an Imperial Princess coming had quickly spread throughout the place, or those people knew they should stay away from the guests; no one talked to them.

“My niece should be in the library,” said Yamino as they arrived at a lower floor. “She is a clever girl and loves reading, she is a bit of an indoor flower, you see.”

“I know someone like that,” said Tessa, smiling at her cousin.

Cessilia smiled back. Perhaps Naptunie could become a good friend indeed... Plus, now that he had mentioned it, she was a bit curious to discover that library. Cessilia had read almost every book she could find in all three of the palaces she lived in, and her grandmother even gifted her several books for each of her birthdays, just so she could have something new to read. In fact, in the Dragon Empire, it was rumored that the Princess’ love for books had multiplied the circulation of books within the Empire and inspired more of the youth to read, as she and her mother regularly donated books to the schools, orphanages, and charities.

However, Cessilia found herself a bit disappointed when they entered the library.

The room wasn't as big as she had hoped, nor filled with books. In fact, some of the shelves were half-empty and seemed too large for their contents. The old oak wood seemed about to crumble, and the colored leather of some books was standing out too much among the decrepit ones. Seeing the disappointment in the Princess' eyes, Yassim stepped forward, a bit apologetic.

“Because of the recent war, a lot of the books are now in the people's private properties rather than in the castle's library... They became extremely rare and valuable due to many of them getting burned too, so it has become harder to replenish these shelves. They were once filled with dozens of amazing books, my lady. All of the Counselors have been trying to bring more books back, but...”

“There are too many thieves,” sighed Yamino. “Because the books are so valuable, some are getting stolen every week, despite His Majesty putting some guards here.”

“Th-that's sad...” muttered Cessilia.

Slowly, she stepped into the library first, her green eyes going to the shelves without touching any of those books. This place felt... forsaken. It was as if a few people had tried to take care of it, then abandoned it. There was dust on the shelves, and only the books with the prettiest covers seemed to be properly taken care of. The oldest, ugliest ones had their back covers falling apart and were piling up dust. Cessilia's eyes were reading one title after another, most of them completely unknown to her. She was still very curious to read each of these books, but her heart was pained when she witnessed their poor state. She grabbed one of the very old books.

“Anyone c-can take a b-book here?”

“Anyone, Princess.”

The voice had come from the other side of the shelf. Cessilia's green eyes looked in between the books, and sure enough, a pair of dark eyes appeared, with a smile on those red lips.

Jisel was staring at her from the other side, her eyes smiling.

"We meet again, Princess. What a coincidence..."

"...Lad-dy Jisel," simply said Cessilia.

"I'm flattered you already remember my name, Princess Cessilia of the Dragon Empire."

She slowly stepped to the side, her red dress floating around her. She was even prettier up close, but not strikingly beautiful. Jisel had a pointy chin, a long nose, and thin eyebrows, and her long, red hair was flowing elegantly over her bare shoulders, showing her collarbones and silver earrings.

"...You were right, Counselor," scoffed Tessa. "They really let anyone in here..."

"Oh, women are welcome to instruct themselves as well," said Jisel, "...even the whores."

This time, the smirk disappeared from Tessa's face. Jisel looked a bit amused at her reaction, as she had just shown that such insults wouldn't hurt her at all. It was clear she was used to it, and not willing to take offense so easily. She seemed like a very intelligent woman to Cessilia, but it didn't change how she just couldn't like that woman. Her green eyes didn't hide it, nor did she shy away from the black eyes staring right back at her.

"I am not your enemy, Princess," said Jisel, tilting her head. "As you probably already know, I am not even a contestant to be His Majesty's wife. I have no desire to fight you either. ...After all, aren't we almost relatives? I was surprised when I saw you too... I had heard rumors. That the infamous War God had fallen for a white-skinned concubine... Looks like it was all true."

Tessa frowned and clenched her fists, annoyed about Jisel's words. Even if it was true, she didn't like this woman pointing out their common heritage.

Yet, to everyone's surprise, Cessilia smiled slightly. The Princess was just as calm and composed as the King's mistress facing her. The tension between them was obvious, but there was also a clear intent from both women not to let the other get to her. Never had the Counselors thought they'd ever witness such a passive argument... The green-eyed Princess finally stopped staring at Jisel and grabbed one of the old books.

"You were r-right," she said.

"...About what?" asked Jisel, frowning.

She was clearly surprised by Cessilia's reaction, as was everyone else. Shouldn't she be annoyed at the King's mistress? Yet, the Princess quietly opened that book, her fingers caressing the pages with a very calm demeanor. After a short while, she closed it.

"...You're not c-competition," she said, without looking at the redhead.

Those words left Jisel stunned, and Cessilia turned around, ignoring her. Although she was a bit lost at what had just happened, Tessa felt a bit proud of her cousin, and followed her as she walked away between the shelves, leaving her rival there.

She held that old book against her chest, but Cessilia didn't look at any more books as she walked out. She just wanted to leave this room, and get as far away as possible from the woman that made her uncomfortable. The little group followed behind in silence, the two Counselors visibly awkward. For Cessilia to run into the King's mistress so quickly was among the worst-case scenarios. Even if nothing major had happened, both old men felt bad for the young Princess. However, Cessilia had acted strangely calm and composed all along, and even her stutter hadn't taken away her little win over the redhead. She had left her rival speechless and walked away before Jisel could find a comeback. In his heart, Yassim grew a bit prouder of the Princess each minute.

Cessilia wasn't as composed inside as she appeared to look. In fact, she just focused on walking, sealing and muting her emotions in the back of her mind, until she suddenly stopped, realizing she had no idea where she was.

She glanced around and turned to the two old men who had remained quiet the whole time.

"I'm s-sorry," she muttered. "Where...?"

"Oh, this way Princess," said Yamino with an honest smile. "We're very close!"

Following them silently, Yassim was once again baffled. In just a few minutes, the Princess had gone from a fierce tiger ready to stand her ground against her rival, to now looking like a lost and inoffensive young lady again. Only Tessa didn't seem surprised at all, and just followed behind with a satisfied expression. Yamino was happily chatting with her about his niece's whereabouts, but Yassim knew his friend was probably as curious about the Princess as he was. He really couldn't trust his own eyes when it came to the Dragon Empire's people...

"Naptunie, sweetie?" Yamino gently knocked on one door.

He slowly opened the door, which led to a very small office. In fact, it was just large enough for two desks facing each other against a window, and another table full of piled-up books, parchments, and broken feathers.

"Uncle Mino!" exclaimed a young woman, almost jumping off her seat. "Look, I finished doing the math on..."

Naptunie froze as she saw that her uncle wasn't alone. She was strikingly similar to her uncle, with a very round face, very round body, curly black hair, and small eyes. Her skin was very dark too, and she was of a small but large build, with her two high pigtails making her look even cuter. Cessilia was immediately reminded of those baby bear cubs her brother had found once, with her little upturned nose and small, pouty lips. She wore a very simple, long, blue dress, and for jewelry, two large nacre bracelets around her wrists, and similar hoop earrings.

“Hi...” She smiled, sending curious glances toward her uncle.

“Princess Cessilia, Lady Tessa, this is my niece, Naptunie. She’s sixteen and a very bright, intelligent girl.”

“Oh, Uncle... Wait, Princess?” she immediately opened her eyes wide and turned to Cessilia and Tessa. “You’re the two ladies who attended court this morning? The Princesses! I’m so pleased to meet you! And you’re so pretty too! Is your skin color real? Can I touch it? Oh, sorry, I probably shouldn’t ask things like that... Oh, hi, Uncle Yassim! Welcome back... He’s back for real, right? Is it alright to ask?”

She had a cute voice and spoke very fast, clearly not bothering to sort out her thoughts first. Cessilia thought to herself she was a bit like Tessa as she spoke with little to no filter. Though in her case, it didn’t seem like she did it on purpose. Even right now, she turned her eyes to her uncle with a worried expression to ask for confirmation, realizing a bit late her poor choice of words. Yamino laughed and nodded, while Yassim stepped forward.

“Yes, Lady Naptunie, I am back for real. You’ve grown well.”

“Oh, not so much...” immediately replied the young lady, blushing and patting her chubby cheeks, visibly embarrassed. “I am happy to see you again. And the Princesses! Are you really from the Dragon Empire? You’ve never been here, right?”

“First, I’m not a princess,” said Tessa. “I’m just Tessa. Second, yes, first time here, regretting it already.”

Naptunie was very clearly more curious than afraid and kept adding questions to her previous questions without leaving the girls a single second to try and answer, to the point where even Tessa let her jaw hang after a few seconds, completely baffled.

“...I never thought I’d see a worse word mill than my sis... Seriously, never,” she whispered to Cessilia, shocked.

“You n-never know,” chuckled the Princess, amused.

“Nana!” suddenly shouted Yamino, obviously used to it but nevertheless exhausted. “I told the ladies that you would escort them downtown and show them around. You are about the same age and know the main streets better than Yassim or myself. Princess Cessilia and her cousin, Lady Tessa, are visiting our Kingdom for the first time. I think it would be best if you showed them around...”

Naptunie’s eyes immediately sparkled as she smiled brightly at the two young women.

“Of course! I know all the best places to go, the best shops, and the best restaurants! You girls will love it! Oh, and we should go see my cousins, they have the best fish beignet shop! They even have the rarest ones, and the best sea powder cakes too!”

Tessa smiled awkwardly, but Naptunie’s bright optimism was shining and contagious. Cessilia nodded, feeling a bit excited to meet a young woman their age to guide them around this new city.

“Nice t-to meet you, N-Naptunie.”

“Oh, please call me Nana!” replied the young woman. “Everybody does! Oh, should I call you Princess? Or Your Highness? This is my first time meeting a real Imperial Princess! Do you have a real tiara? Is it made of gold? You have so much gold on you! Is it real gold? It has to be, right? Oh, one of my friend’s aunties has the best jewelry shop, we should stop by and say hi! Of course, we will drop by my cousins’ shop first! Do you guys like fish? I’m sorry, I tend to talk a lot when I’m nervous, and meeting new people makes me very nervous...”

“Who would have noticed...” muttered Tessa.

“You should go, ladies,” chuckled Yamino. “The weather is meant to be nice today, you young ones should enjoy it all you want. Old men like us wouldn’t be able to keep up anyway, and the Capital is more enjoyable with people your own age!”

“Please come back to the castle before the sunset, my ladies,” said Yassim, visibly worried. “If anything happens to you—”

“If anything happens to us, it will rain flames,” scoffed Tessa. “Come on, let’s go and enjoy ourselves. I feel like we will not have many days like this once this damn competition thing or whatever really starts...”

“Oh, I know exactly where to go first!” exclaimed Nana, walking ahead. “Have you ever tried fresh coconut juice?”

“No, and what in the world is a coconut...”

Cessilia chuckled, watching the two young women leave first, bickering in the corridor. She glanced toward Yassim again, with a gentle expression.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

Yassim was a bit confused as to why exactly she was thanking him, of all people.

For bringing her here? This whole ordeal was nothing like he had promised. No, in fact, if it wasn’t for Yamino’s niece offering them a tour of the Capital, he wouldn’t have known what to do or say to the young ladies. He still felt bad about all of this, despite still knowing he had sincerely done what he thought he should. Because he had acted for the Kingdom’s sake, not Cessilia’s. In just one morning, she had already met the King and his mistress, discovered the three spies placed by her side, and been stared at with disdain by all of the most powerful people in this Kingdom. All that right after she had been taken away from her family, from her home she was perfectly safe in. In fact, Yassim was still at a loss as to why this young, brave woman that still looked so fragile at times would willingly go through all of this, and with such a soft smile too...

Walking down the corridor, Cessilia was oblivious to Yassim’s considerations. In fact, she was even fine with ignoring the triplets still silently walking behind her, and instead, she was smiling at Nana’s non-stop chattering and the faces her cousin was making. As someone used to having a very chatty sister already, despite her earlier complaints, Tessa could endure Nana’s word mill spinning at full speed just fine.

Moreover, it wasn't just noise, she was actually providing them with a lot of information and turned out to be not only very chatty, but highly informed about pretty much anything an educated woman her age would be.

By the time they reached the ground floor, they already knew all about how she had six siblings she got along with, her family coming from a long line of fishermen and fish sellers, their pride as part of the Dorosef Tribe, and her own upbringing. Even how she had been given books to keep herself busy since she was too precocious even for her parents to keep up, Tessa rolled her eyes multiple times at that part, and how she had begun her apprenticeship as her uncle's assistant just four years ago. Apparently, the only thing that could rival Nana's love for books and knowledge was her love for food. As they walked by the kitchen, she greeted all the cooks, calling them by their names and proudly introducing the two cousins as if they had been friends forever. In fact, Nana's blinding optimism was such that she didn't even seem to realize how many jaws dropped as the kitchen staff realized they were being introduced to an Imperial Princess.

"Let's go!" she quickly said as they walked out of the castle. "The earlier we go, the better our fish buns will be. Normally, people start queuing before dawn for my auntie's fish beignets, the fresh ones are the best!"

"Fresh ones?" repeated Tessa, frowning. "You don't... cook the fish?"

"Oh, we love it half-cooked!" said Nana with a wink. "The inside is still fresh, and the exterior is slightly cooked with the hot dough! And those sea salt-seasoned vegetables, and the sea herb white cream that goes perfectly with it... Oh, I'm salivating just thinking about it!"

Although they had just had breakfast, right now, both cousins were inevitably curious about those delicious-sounding dishes. Nana took them outside the castle's gates, and Cessilia realized they were somehow still high up on the upper half of the mountain they had seen from the outside. In fact, to get out of the castle, it just took three open arches, with two guards at each that sent them curious glances even as cheerful Nana greeted them, and that was it.

“...Wait a minute,” said Tessa, shocked. “That’s it? We are out of the castle? You call this security?!”

“Oh, going into the castle is easy,” chuckled Nana, “but the main security is at the Inner Capital’s entrance, farther down. No one is allowed inside the Capital without an official pass, so make sure to never, ever leave without one. Even if the guard is your brother, they won’t let you in without the papers. And trust me, it has happened to me and my siblings more than once!”

“...I d-don’t understand,” said Cessilia. “Why g-guard the C-Capital and not the c-c-castle?”

“Oh, this is the King’s idea. The Capital is extremely selective, so it has to be the safest place. Actually, where we are now is called the Inner Capital. It is the safest place in all of the Kingdom, after the castle itself. If we go lower down, about three or four levels, we will reach the Inner Gates, and past those, it’s the Greater Capital. The Greater Capital has more habitations, some cheaper shops, but it’s also a bit less safe. Then, there are the four bridges. Once you pass the bridges, you’re still in the Capital, but in the Outer Capital. Technically, it is still part of the Capital, but no more shops, just a few houses and private lands for cultivation, fishing, and so on. It’s where everyone who wants to get in the Capital has to stop once they pass the great walls.”

“Wait, there are more walls?” said Tessa, confused already.

“Yes, the very first step to getting inside the Capital is the Outer Wall... supposedly,” grimaced Nana. “In fact, about a fifth of it was destroyed during the previous war, so a lot of people clandestinely enter every day. That’s why security is more focused on the Inner and Greater Capital than on the outskirts or even the Outer Capital. They are working on rebuilding it, though, and arresting people who enter illegally.”

“I see... So the bridges are actually the main checkpoints?”

“Exactly! Wait, I’ll show you... Ah, there!”

She walked to the wall on their left, which was as tall as two men, but Nana was pointing out of a little window they could see through. Indeed, several levels below, down on the ground level, they could see a portion of a long and large bridge, with dozens of people on it, going one way, into the Capital. From the sky, Cessilia and Tessa hadn't been given much time to see the details of the Capital's architecture, nor how it really was conceived. The walls were just lines from up there, and those bridges didn't seem so big either.

Once again, Cessilia was fascinated.

"It's imp-pressive." She nodded.

"Right?" said Nana with a bright smile. "Come on, let's go get those fish beignets! I'll show you all around the best streets of the city, and we can go anywhere you want in the Inner Capital! You know, most people in the Kingdom dream of living here, and some work hard their whole lives to get the papers to get in! ...Did you get in because you're Princesses?"

"I guess we don't really need papers. We have a... very convincing mount," chuckled Tessa.

She and Nana bickered for a while, as Tessa already loved teasing the young woman. Cessilia briefly turned around to check, but sure enough, the triplets were still following them from a couple of steps behind, acting like silent shadows. She frowned, a bit bothered by those three. However, before she said anything, something caught her attention.

She raised her eyes higher, trying to find that shine that had blinded her for a second.

She found it, hidden in the shadows of a window much, much higher. His silhouette was drawn by the long lines of his white hair, his eyes riveted on her. Cessilia didn't shy away from that stare. Instead, she stared back, with a neutral expression, as if she was waiting for something.

"Cessi! Are you coming?"

She smiled and turned around to join the two girls, pushing that stolen moment to the back of her mind.

