

Chapter 5

Although it was still very early in the morning, the Eastern Kingdom's Capital was already bustling.

Following Nana closely, Cessilia and Tessa couldn't help but feel amazed by how different things were from their own birthplace. This was also a capital, but it was nothing like the ones they knew. First, they were impressed by how much more cramped everything was. In the Dragon Empire, each street was wide enough that several people could walk by without even getting near each other. Here, their little trio had to stick to each other so they wouldn't run into another group. Moreover, the road wasn't flat at all; unlike the dry, sand-like soil of the Dragon Empire, everything here was made of irregular cobblestones, mostly in dark colors, so much so that they had to get used to walking a bit differently so they wouldn't trip. Cessilia was grateful there was less sand, though. This place was much windier, and at each crossway, they could feel the wind blowing from all directions, carrying the salty sea mist along. She could feel that strange, fresh layer of humidity caressing her skin, yet making her lips a bit more dry than usual. Her hair was getting a few more curls than normal too, and she could see the stones, under their feet and on the walls, covered with a thin, shiny layer of that same mist.

"Here!" exclaimed Nana, stopping in front of the small shops. "Let's start with fresh juice... Auntie, can we have three of the classic ones?"

While she happily chatted with the shop owner, Cessilia glanced over the dozens of fruits exposed in front of the stall. She only knew half of them, while the other half was completely foreign to her. Even Tessa, impressed, couldn't stop herself from asking Nana over and over the name of various fruits. Eventually, she turned around, offering them a strange, round-shaped fruit with a little bamboo straw in it.

“Here! This is one of my favorites! The coconuts are imported from one of the islands farther south, so they have to transport them overnight. In a few hours, they won’t be good! That’s why a lot of people wake up early to get the freshest fruits!”

Cessilia was impressed. She knew the whole geography of the Dragon Empire enough to know wherever she went, she’d find pretty much the same fruits and vegetables in the shops. Only in the north were things rarer, but overall still the same. However, here, because the Kingdom included a lot of islands scattered around, they could also enjoy some foreign delicacies like this... As they continued their little morning stroll, it was clear only a handful of shops were selling those first-hand exotic fruits. In fact, most shops were still closed, or only just opening, while the ones already in business were those who had to sell out their fresh fruits or fish.

Nana’s chattiness made her an excellent guide. Her uncle hadn’t exaggerated her knowledge; she knew most people they crossed paths with and had an answer for absolutely everything. She could describe the process for woven baskets in front of a shop, the reasons for the various water canals they had to cross, how they used seaweed as dry or humid wraps for some dishes, and even the strange miniature houses stuck mid-height between the buildings.

“Those are cat houses! A few decades back, we had serious rodent issues... So, a lot of people adopted cats, and let them roam the city to get rid of the rodents. Now, they know that if they bring dead mice or rats to the fishermen, they get free fish! Those houses are for them when they need to have kittens, or just if they don’t like to live with humans. The fishermen even leave them the unsold fish at times, otherwise, they just steal it...”

“Th-that is impressive,” nodded Cessilia.

“Right? Our family has two cats, but they aren’t very good hunters anymore, they are too old. But at least they keep the mice away, and they love cuddles too!”

Nana's positivity was contagious, and Cessilia smiled while trying to sip her juice. It was good, sweet, and refreshing. Not only that but wandering in a new city, completely foreign to her own world, had something vibrant about it. The sky was colored with bright pink and orange streaks, the sky getting bluer and bluer every minute. It was a bit colder than what she was used to. The Capital of the Dragon Empire would have been much hotter already at this time of the day, while her father's Onyx Castle would still be hot from all the chimney fires, as opposed to the frost outside. She slightly regretted having left their coats back in the castle, but it was bearable.

The large rock they were walking on was a new kind of climate she wasn't quite used to; not too cold, yet humid from the sea winds stroking her hair. Her dress was sticking to her body a bit, and she could feel the drops on her neck, although she couldn't tell if it was her own sweat or just dripping from all the humidity. It really was a strange place...

"Thank you for the drinks, Nana," said Tessa, "but we're probably going to need our own money. Do you use the same as ours here?"

"Oh, we have different kinds of coins, but they will take any kind of silver! It's too precious, so even if it hasn't been changed to our currency, you can definitely use it, with the weight."

Cessilia doubted they would have any money issues here. When Nana bought their juices earlier, she did notice how cheap it was compared to a drink in the Dragon Empire... In fact, the little silver coins she had handed over wouldn't have been enough to buy a single drink in the Capital. No wonder the few people they had seen were helplessly gawking at her golden jewelry... Although it was a nice change for these people not to be as shocked by her skin color, it was definitely intriguing. Back in the Dragon Empire, her mother's milk-white skin had long been a sign of slavery, while now, there wasn't one person in the Dragon Empire who ignored that the Imperial Princes and Princesses' skin color was lighter than most. Of course, she and her brothers and sisters came in all shades, but they definitely stood out wherever they went. Yet here, no one seemed as shocked by her skin or eyes as they were by her jewelry.

“N-Nana? Are mixed p-people c-common here?” she asked as they were queuing for another shop.

“Well, it’s definitely rare, but... not unseen,” said Nana, frowning a bit. “The Hashat Family is known to have mixed people with lighter skin than most, at least, so even if most people haven’t seen it, we know they do exist... Are all the Dragon Empire people light-skinned too?”

“No,” replied Tessa. “Our moms are white-skinned, but aside from them, there are only a few people like that in all of the Empire. That’s why we were shocked to hear about that tribe.”

“Oh... Well, we will probably see some in the castle! The Hashat Family lives outside of the Capital, but I know their leader comes to the King’s meetings, so...”

“Are th-there many p-people outside the C-Capital? F-from what we saw f-from ab-... above, there weren’t m-many villages...”

“Not that many,” said Nana with a sigh. “A lot of the Kingdom has been destroyed by the wars, and many villages are completely abandoned... Wait, what do you mean from above?”

“We will show you later,” said Tessa with a smile, gently pushing her forward in the line.

However, Nana wasn’t satisfied with that explanation. She kept suspiciously staring at the two of them even as she ordered more food, this time letting Tessa pay for it.

“You are Princesses, my uncle said,” she insisted, “so, you’re related to the Empress? For real? Do you live in the Imperial Palace? ...Do you really have dragons in the Imperial Family?”

“You’ve never seen a dragon?” smirked Tessa.

“Of course not! I heard they are terrifying...”

“Oh, they are, and they love to eat chatty, little ladies...”

Nana pouted a bit, well aware Tessa was teasing her. The three girls were getting along as well as the Royal Counselors had predicted, and Cessilia

too couldn't help but chuckle at her cousin trying to scare the young lady. Thankfully, the food they had ordered this time was hot, little, caramelized fruit skewers that melted on her tongue and warmed her up from the inside.

"This is so good," said Tessa, although she kept blowing out to get rid of the heat.

"Right? This is the best shop for grilled fruit skewers! She even has some that she flames with alcohol!"

"Why didn't you give us that?!" protested Tessa.

"She can't sell them in the morning, it's way too early!" laughed Nana. "Alcohol selling and consumption is strictly regulated within the Capital, you can only have some during certain hours. Everything is much stricter here, but it's to ensure people's safety. A few years back, you could see so many drunkards here at any time of the day..."

"Is it the K-King's orders?" asked Cessilia.

"Yes," nodded Nana as they resumed their stroll in the streets. "He put a lot of new laws in place here to make the Capital safer. At first, some people protested that it was too strict, but to be honest, it was needed. Most of our cities had turned into lairs for thieves and criminals, but once the King used the army to repress them, the people felt a lot safer, and the crime rate dropped too... When I was young, my parents never would have let me go in the streets like this, without at least my older brother or my dad. That's also why my brother decided to become a soldier."

"Why would people be against it?" frowned Tessa. "If it chased away criminals? I mean, our aunt is pretty strict too, but there's no one who's against rules keeping thieves and criminals at bay..."

As she said that, Nana glanced sideways as if she was a bit scared of people around listening. In fact, Cessilia and Tessa were both attracting a lot of attention with what they wore. She sighed, and gently pushed them toward another, emptier street. Once she was sure no one could listen, she still spoke in a soft voice.

“A lot of people felt the King’s rules were a bit too... strict,” she whispered. “For a while, even the smallest crimes resulted in the death penalty, and dozens of people were executed every day.”

“Well, I don’t like thieves, but...” said Tessa, frowning.

On the other side, Cessilia was the one who understood.

“P-people were s-starving,” she whispered. “Those th-thieves p-probably didn’t choose to b-be... thieves.”

“Exactly,” nodded Nana. “To be honest, it was hard for everyone after the war. The Capital now is the best I’ve seen since I was born, but when I was a child, most families struggled to survive. I remember our family sometimes struggling to have enough food, and when we could, we shared with our friends so no one would starve or have to steal. Our clan isn’t the wealthiest, but unlike some, we know how to share with others. While people starved, some rich people kept their homes closed, and killed trespassers or beggars.”

“So much for generosity...” grimaced Tessa.

“That’s why a lot of the clans are still not getting along, and they don’t like the King, either. He taxes the rich people to pay the military, offers free food to the most needy, and finances the White Houses.”

“The... White Houses?” repeated Tessa, lifting an eyebrow.

“Oh, that’s a great thing he did!” exclaimed Nana. “They offer free health checks and healing for the poor. Basically, people can come in and get a consultation from a doctor anytime. It’s completely free, but the medicine has to be paid for. The doctors and their apprentices are all paid by the Kingdom, so no one has to pay. The rich people have their own doctors anyway, so it’s mostly the poor who... What is it?”

Tessa was making a shocked expression, but she turned to Cessilia instead.

“Isn’t that exactly the same system your mother created in the Dragon Empire?!” she exclaimed.

“Maybe he g-got inspiration f-from us...” smiled Cessilia.

Tessa kept frowning at her cousin’s mysterious smile but didn’t ask anymore. Between them, Nana, a bit lost, scratched her head and just shrugged.

“You have that too? That was a very nice change he put in place... In fact, that’s also one of the reasons the Hashat Family became so renowned; more than half the people working in the White Houses are from that tribe. Of course, a lot of the other clans are a bit pissed that the King basically gives their money to that clan, but they are the most useful to him, so it can’t be helped.”

“I do feel like your King pisses off a lot of people...”

Nana chuckled a bit nervously, not denying it.

They had just arrived at the seaport, where activity was buzzing. The strong smell of fish hit their senses, but it wasn’t so surprising, considering the dozens of stalls lined up with all the merchandise there. Most were, in fact, still alive, swimming in small boxes filled with water. Cessilia was amazed by all the varieties of fish. Because her brothers hunted so much, she was more accustomed to eating meat than fish, and she mostly had a vegetarian diet like her mother. This was her first time at a real Fish Market, and it was a completely new experience. Tessa even seemed a bit scared as they walked by enormous ones, with their large, globulous eyes following their trio.

“You tease me about dragons, but this Princess can’t handle fish?” chuckled Nana.

“Is that thing even a fish?” protested Tessa. “It’s as big as a cow! ...And I’m not a princess!”

The young woman laughed, but walked a bit further up the stalls, greeting a lot more people on her way. It looked like she hadn’t lied about her tribe being deeply involved in the fishing market; Nana was on a first-name basis with absolutely everyone there, calling some uncle, auntie, or cousin. In fact, it was rather easy to recognize the people of her tribe; for

some reason, they were all large people with plump cheeks, large smiles, and that upturned nose. The women also wore similar white nacre jewelry, probably very common around here.

“This Fish Market is the best and largest in all the Kingdom,” Nana proudly announced. “Most of the people working here are part of our tribe, so we are doing pretty well on our own!”

“It looks like you have a lot of your people here indeed...” said Tessa.

“Well, our tribe was always located on the seashore, so we have been fishermen for generations! Due to many of the lands being burned during the wars, there isn’t enough land anymore to cultivate crops, have pastures, and raise enough livestock to feed everyone, so now a lot of the Eastern people buy fish and seafood instead! It is quite nice, to be honest. For a long time, our tribe was among the poorest because we have so many people and we share our wealth, but now, we’re doing pretty well.”

“Your p-people are good p-people,” said Cessilia with a gentle smile.

“Thank you,” replied Nana, blushing a bit. “I really love our tribe, you know. I don’t see myself marrying anyone other than a fisherman! I just haven’t met the right one yet! I’m sure I’ll find a perfect match to get married to. All my sisters are married or engaged already, but because I chose to focus on my studies, it’s a bit harder for me. Dorosef boys like girls who can cook well, and I don’t really... but I asked my aunties to find me a good husband, so I just need to be patient!”

“You should find a man who likes a woman with brains!” retorted Tessa, scoffing. “The man can cook too!”

“T-Tessa’s dad is a g-good family man,” nodded Cessilia. “He likes t-to c-cook for his d-daughters and my aunt.”

“Mom didn’t leave him much of a choice,” chuckled Tessa.

“How about you?” asked Nana. “Do you have a boyfriend, Lady Tessa? A fiancé?”

“Oh, I do have a few past ones, but I don’t like clingy guys. I’m waiting for a guy with brains, muscles, and who can be a good husband, or I won’t have any!”

“That’s a lot!” exclaimed Nana.

“M-maybe you’ll find one here,” chuckled Cessilia.

“I doubt it”, sighed Tessa, looking around at the fishermen.

While Nana tried to convince Tessa about the goodness of the Dorosef men, the girls kept walking around, often stopped by one of Nana’s relatives who greeted them. The Dorosef people did look very nice and humble. Unlike before, most of them didn’t even seem to notice her golden jewelry and were too focused on their merchandise instead. The customers were already lined up to buy the freshest goods, just as Nana had predicted.

“Nana!” called a younger woman on the side, who was carrying two large baskets full of fresh fish.

“Cousin Beli!” smiled Nana. “We came to buy your sister’s fish beignets! Could you give us some?”

“Nana, have you heard?” asked her cousin, running up to them. “Uncle Jupitan came back from his rounds around the cultures this morning, he said he spotted a dragon flying in the area! Uncle Saturu and Auntie Vena said the same! Can you believe that?! A dragon, here! They are sending our hunters to see if we can hunt it or chase it away from the cattle, everyone is panicking in the lands!”

Cessilia and Tessa immediately exchanged a glance.

“Uh-oh...” grimaced Tessa. “We probably should have told the big boy to keep a low profile...”

“I asked him t-to stay in the area,” muttered Cessilia. “I f-forgot about his meals...”

Having heard them, Nana turned to the two cousins.

“You two really came with a real dr-... dragon?!” she exclaimed.

Cessilia jumped to cover her mouth, a second too late. A lot of people had already turned their eyes to the little group of girls, curious or doubting their ears, and her cousin's jaw fell too.

"You should shout it louder," grumbled Tessa, poking Naptunie's flank.

"B-b-but I thought you were just teasing me!"

"Who are you guys?" asked Nana's cousin, frowning and staring at the two of them from head to toe. "What do you know about the dragon?"

"S-sorry," said Cessilia. "He c-came with us..."

"More like we came with him," added Tessa. "...Did he hunt anything yet?"

"It sure did! That dragon killed three cows already!" exclaimed Beli. "And everyone is scared it will eat them next!"

"He d-doesn't eat humans... anymore."

"Anymore?" repeated Nana, shocked.

"He's n-nice," added Cessilia quickly, a bit embarrassed. "Anyway, we c-can t-tell him to stay away from the c-cattle. He's j-just hungry... We will p-pay you for the c-cows he ate."

"Fine..." said Beli, her eyes on Cessilia's golden choker. "If you can guarantee it really won't eat anyone, I guess... I'll try to talk to the others. But can't it eat anything other than our livestock? We already don't have many!"

Tessa looked around them.

"Well, I guess as long as we give him enough, he probably can go on a fish diet..."

"N-Nana," said Cessilia, turning to her. "C-can we b-buy three really b-big fish like the ones we saw? The b-biggest ones should b-be enough for now."

Nana's eyes lit up right away.

“Of course! I’ll ask my uncles to get them ready for your dragon!”

She immediately ran to talk to one of the men behind the stalls, explaining the situation quickly. Meanwhile, Cessilia turned to Beli again.

“I’m r-really sorry ab-bout that,” she said.

“Oh, as long as it doesn’t kill anyone and you can pay for it... You guys are from the Dragon Empire, then?”

Cessilia nodded, and Beli let out a little sigh, putting her baskets down to put her hands on her hips. She kept scrutinizing the two of them, their clothes, and jewelry, and wasn’t hiding herself from it.

“I see. Well, if you buy those fish, you’ll most likely be our biggest customers of the day, so we’re even, I guess. A little piece of advice, though, you may not want to carry so much, uh... gold around. You’re safe here, but if you go past the Inner Wall, you’ll definitely get robbed, assaulted, or worse. We don’t send our girls out because of all the criminals out there, and you two are walking around with all that on you... Not only that, but a lot of people aren’t really fond of... your kind, you know. Our tribe doesn’t have many warriors, but we still know the War God of the Dragon Empire killed many of our men a couple of decades ago. Whether that guy is real or not, some people remember and most aren’t fond of the Dragon Empire at all... If you’re really from there, you two girls should seriously watch out.”

“Thanks, but we are not defenseless,” said Tessa. “We can fend for ourselves.”

“Good for you, but Naptunie doesn’t have a dragon,” retorted Beli. “Our Dorosef Tribe is rather welcoming to strangers, but honestly, not all the other tribes are as passive. And if anything happens to you, nobody wants retribution from the Dragon Empire...”

“We will b-be careful,” promised Cessilia.

Beli nodded, visibly unconvinced, but she had said what she wanted to. In fact, Cessilia didn’t mind her honesty. At least, she showed some genuine concern for them, not just for her cousin. Beli was probably a few

years older than them, and from what they had seen, the Dorosef Tribe was indeed a large and caring family...

Nana came back a couple of minutes later, a bit out of breath and followed by a very large man, whom she introduced as one of her uncles. He was also very tall, with an impressive braided beard, and a striking resemblance to Counselor Yamino.

“Good morning, younglings,” he said, nodding. “I heard you ladies want to buy our biggest fish for a... dragon? Really?”

“Well, apparently it’s either that or your cows,” chuckled Tessa.

“Oh, for sure we’d rather have it eat our fish!” nodded the man, pulling up his pants. “Where shall we deliver it to? We can have our three best catches of the day ready within the hour!”

“C-can you have a c-cart ready?” asked Cessilia. “It’s b-best if we deliver to him.”

“You can’t go out!” exclaimed Nana, panicked. “We need a lot of authorizations to go out and come in again, inside the Capital’s Inner Walls, like I explained earlier!”

“Nana, it’s either that or we have that dragon land in the middle of the Capital,” sighed Tessa. “No offense, but he’s a bit too big, even for this plaza! And I don’t think anyone else will volunteer to feed him, right?”

Nana and her uncle exchanged a glance.

Indeed, their people had only seen the dragon from afar, but no one would willingly approach it from up close, especially not to give it its meal. They’d be too scared for it to want some human flesh for a dessert... The fisherman scratched his shaved head with a grimace.

“Oh, well, I guess we can give you younglings one of our passes... Nana, are you sure?”

Since the two young women were strangers, he turned to his niece, but Nana visibly wasn’t sure either. She had only met Cessilia and Tessa just a couple of hours ago. She nervously touched her ear and her earrings,

hesitant. Seeing that she couldn't make up her mind, Cessilia put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"It will b-be alright, I p-promise. K-Krai would n-never hurt us, and he d-doesn't eat humans, either."

"Unless they're very bad ones..." muttered Tessa.

Thankfully, only Cessilia heard that, and she kept smiling, ignoring her cousin's remark. Nana frowned a bit, but she eventually nodded and turned to her uncle once again.

"I will accompany the Princesses outside, okay? I will ask Sabael to accompany us, and we will be careful too. They really are from the Dragon Empire, and Uncle Yamino asked me to stay with them. We will come back right away!"

"It will b-be fine," nodded Cessilia.

"Alright, then. Well, we can have our prizes ready right now, and I'll send one of the boys to meet you at the southeast gate with the cart and the passes for you. Your brother's still stationed there, right?"

"Yes!" nodded Nana. "Thank you, Uncle."

"Yeah, yeah... As long as that thing leaves our cattle alone..."

"We will buy more fish to keep him fed," said Tessa, "so you might want to keep your large prizes for him in the next few days. In weight, it should be enough if you keep aside... about five cows' worth of meat? That should keep him fed for two or three days."

"Fine, you ladies can pay us tomorrow then," he said, his eyes going down on Cessilia's golden choker. "I'll tell the boys to keep our biggest ones for your dragon. ...I can't believe we're fishing for a dragon now!"

The man waved his arms in the air and turned around, probably to go and make sure everything was ready. Nana turned to her cousin this time.

"Sorry about all that, Beli. Can we grab some beignets before we go? I'll get some for Sab too!"

It seemed like the perspective of those fish beignets was enough to chase all of Nana's worries away, which made Cessilia smile. Those beignets ought to be really delicious... Without any more questions, Beli guided them the rest of the way to her sister's stand, where, exactly as Nana had said, a long line of people were queuing up for those famous beignets. Luckily for them, though, Beli sneaked past all that, whispered something to her sister who was working and began preparing their order herself. Cessilia was impressed by how simple and small their stall was for such a long line of customers. Everything was indeed done right on the spot: the fresh fish Beli had brought was cut by a man at the back, and the chunks split into several buckets depending on the species of fish. Then, a pair of young boys grabbed a handful of fish and rolled it into something that looked like a flour mix, before Beli's sister covered it in several layers of dough and fried it in one large oil pan in front of her. She was working incredibly fast too, pouring one after another and grabbing the ready ones with a pair of large chopsticks to wrap them in seaweed and hand it to the customers. Completing this human chain was a young girl, happily smiling at the customers while taking their payment and loudly announcing the orders to the rest of the family as they went. In the midst of all this, Beli dropped the basket of fish, went to the younger boys to get the fish, and squeezed herself next to her sister to get some ready for them.

Just like that, their orders were ready in a couple of minutes and handed to them by Beli.

“Here you go ladies, the best fish beignets in the Capital.”

“Thank you!” exclaimed Nana, receiving her order and her brother's with sparkling eyes.

Cessilia and Tessa were a bit excited to receive theirs too, and they thanked Beli before walking away. It was clear she had to go back to work and help her sister sell those beignets, and Cessilia couldn't help but stare a little longer at the small family business, which doubled in speed as soon as Beli was in her spot.

Next to her, Tessa frowned and finally bit the beignet hungrily.

“Careful, it’s hot!” exclaimed Nana.

“Oh, don’t worry, we can handle the heat,” replied Tessa with her mouth full. “...Damn, this is really good!”

“See? I told you!”

Cessilia smiled and took a bite of hers too. It was very good indeed. The dough was crispy, savory, and hot, and the fish inside was half-cooked, melting on her tongue with all the flavors of the sea. She already loved it, and for a while, none of the three girls spoke anymore as they focused on eating those beignets while walking down the streets.

Things around them were getting a bit busier now, a lot of people were either on their way to the Fish Market or coming back from it, while the smaller shops were opening. Cessilia noticed a couple of accessories shops she was interested in, notably the nacre jewelry she had already grown somewhat fond of. She also noticed some stones lined up, of different colors, with various uses as bracelets or necklaces, and asked Nana about it.

“Those are worship stones!” she exclaimed. “We believe that each god has a stone they channel their natural energy into, and we purchase those stones for prayers. For example, those dark green ones are used to protect the houses from malevolent people, and the white ones are a symbol of purity, for weddings! Most families have at least one of each nowadays, but it is good luck to get one or two from the gods you choose to venerate the most! In my family, we like the Goddess of the Sea, so we purchase those nacre stones! Oh, and my brother is a fighter, so he takes the black ones, from our Goddess of War! You don’t have those? How do you guys communicate with your gods?”

“...I guess you call him Daddy?” chuckled Tessa, glancing toward Cessilia.

“In our c-culture,” said Cessilia, “our g-gods are humans or d-dragons. My father g-got his t-title as the War G-God when he was young and won many wars. I b-believe our p-people worship d-dragons more, though.”

“So they won’t eat them, basically,” added Tessa. “I think our religion is a bit more... practical than stones like that. All of our gods did exist at some point, most often past emperors or princes that had dragons, or heroes of some sort.”

“I think I like our gods better,” shrugged Nana. “They are all still alive, and very powerful too! When we have a hurricane, everyone prays for the Goddess of the Sea to calm down. My family even has a little temple for her!”

“That must b-be a p-pretty one,” said Cessilia.

“It is! I will take you guys to my family house when you want! It is a bit crowded, but we will welcome strangers anytime!”

As they kept walking, Nana described her house to such lengths that it felt like they had been there and knew every room already. Cessilia and Tessa didn’t interrupt her, though, as they were finishing their beignets while looking around. Their trio was slowly but surely getting to the lower levels of the Capital, and now, Cessilia could only see the tips of some of the castle’s towers when she turned back, her vision blocked by all the buildings in between. In front of them, however, behind some of the houses, a wall was starting to appear, and the closer they got, the bigger it grew. Before long, they were really standing in front of the Inner Wall Naptunie had described. It was clear most of it had been recently built, and it was strangely clean for something merely made of stones. Their little group was heading toward a pair of very large doors that were kept open, but with four men in armor guarding it and checking everyone who went in or out. The process seemed smooth, but Cessilia could see the long flow of people waiting to get in.

Nana, who once again seemed familiar with everyone they saw, quickly walked to one of the guards standing to the side to ask about her brother’s whereabouts. He pointed to a little house at the corner of the street, which was clearly some sort of armory.

“Just wait for me, I’ll be right back!” she claimed before going in.

“Sure,” said Tessa, a hand on her hip.

She turned to the gate, frowning a bit.

“Seems like we really got the easy way in,” she sighed. “Judging from here, people at the end of that line probably wait for at least an hour before they can get in... That’s quite impressive security, considering there are four guards. I wondered why we didn’t see many inside, but this is different from our Capital.”

“Everything is d-different,” nodded Cessilia, “b-but it’s nice. I think Auntie Shareen would b-be curious t-to see how they d-do things here...”

“I wonder. She was never fond of the Eastern Kingdom since they attacked us two decades ago. I’m even surprised she agreed to this at all. Now, well, it’s nice to be far from home. I’ve always been curious as to what was past our border... Damn, Kiera will be dead jealous once she finds out you were actually allowed to come here.”

Cessilia chuckled at the mention of her little sister. Indeed, Kiera’s unwavering passion for adventures had already taken her pretty much anywhere she could go in the Dragon Empire, despite its considerable size. However, the Eastern Kingdom had always been the limit. They definitely couldn’t get past the guarded border, and none of the dragons would fly past it either, not without an order from the Empress or the War God himself. In fact, Cessilia realized she was the first one in her family to come so far in the Eastern Kingdom since... probably a few generations ago. She knew from her deep love of books, including the history ones, that the Kingdom and the Empire had once been united as one, but that was eons ago, a time no one but old, dusty books could keep a memory of.

“I need to mention, though, how come everyone in her family looks that similar? I mean, you have seven siblings and there aren’t two of you that look alike as much as Nana looks like her uncle or her cousin. It’s crazy! If it wasn’t for their hairstyle and clothes, I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

While listening to her cousin, Cessilia glanced behind them. Sure enough, the triplets were still there. They had been following them all day, a few

steps behind and as silent as shadows, but always on their trail. Because those three were rather petite too, no one really seemed to notice them either. Unlike in the Dragon Empire, the servants of the castle didn't have any particular outfit it seemed, so she figured they could pass for anyone in the streets of the Capital...

"I swear," chuckled Tessa, still going on. "Nana is as cute as those beignets, but if her brother is another male copy of her, I'm going to laugh and ask how they do this... Do you think they can marry within their family here? I mean, I know no one does that anymore in our Empire, but we know it used to be a thing, right?"

"T-Tessa, don't b-be rude, p-please..." sighed Cessilia.

"I'm not! It's the truth! Wait and see. I bet her brother is going to be her physical twin. I'm buying Krai's next ten meals if he is... if he is... uh..."

The words just wouldn't come out as Tessa's eyes were riveted on the door Nana and her older brother had just come out of. In one glance, Cessilia could see why. Nana's older brother was defying all of her cousin's expectations, and in a surprisingly good way, at that. He was one head taller than his sister, very muscular under his armor, with long black hair that was tied low, a serious look on his face. His chiseled chin was covered by a short layer of beard, and his strong eyebrows were enhancing his beautiful eyes, one brown and the other one hazel. When he turned his gaze to them, as Nana showed him the duo of cousins, Cessilia very clearly heard Tessa's gasp.

"...I th-think you're p-paying for all the next meals, T-Tessa," she chuckled.

It looked like her cousin didn't even hear her at all. In fact, Tessa left her mouth open and her eyes wide open right until Nana and her brother were just two steps away, and Cessilia gave her a little nudge with her elbow, keeping her from totally embarrassing herself.

"This is my older brother, Sabael!" proudly announced Nana, totally unaware of Tessa's reaction. "He is a guard of the Capital; as I mentioned, he will accompany us outside!"

“You’re lucky I’m not on duty,” retorted her brother, with an unexpectedly low voice. “Are you the Princesses she talked about?”

His eyes kept going back and forth between Cessilia and Tessa, visibly a bit unsure about the situation there. Just like everyone else, he seemed surprised by their appearance but still tried to remain somehow polite instead of too obvious.

“Yes,” nodded Cessilia, realizing her cousin was still mute. “Th-Thank you for acomp-p-... t-taking us out th-there.”

“Yeah, I’m not too sure about that. Is this seriously related to that... to a real dragon? We’ve been getting reports from the south since earlier. We weren’t too sure, but no one could make that up... I’ll be glad if it’s nothing too serious, and you girls can really do something about it...”

“I told you, it’s their dragon!” said Nana, enthusiastically. “Uncle Yobah agreed to it too, so we’re just going out to feed their dragon, ask it to be uh... nice, and then we will be back here, I promise.”

Her brother sighed, glancing toward Cessilia and Tessa with a doubtful look. Unlike his sister, Sabael looked a lot more distrustful.

“...Fine,” he grumbled. “Since our uncle agreed to this, I won’t argue. At least you asked me to come along, I wouldn’t trust it if it was just you... Is it just the three of you?”

Cessilia glanced back, and Nupia stepped forward, bowing quickly.

“We are accompanying the Princess as well, by order of the King.”

“By order of the King?” repeated Sabael, visibly stunned once again. “Alright... Fine.”

He let out a little sigh, grumpily glancing at his little sister again before turning to Cessilia and Tessa. However, he seemed resolute now, and the presence of three Royal Servants appeared to convince him.

“I’m Sabael, guard of the southeast Inner Gate. I hope I wasn’t disrespectful to the... Princess,” he mentioned, glancing toward Tessa.

“Oh, she’s the Princess!” immediately said Tessa, who seemed to have found her voice again, and a bright, charming smile with it. “This is Cessilia and I’m Tessandra, her cousin. But everyone calls me Tessa. You can call me whatever you want, handsome.”

She held out her hand proudly, and Cessilia pinched her lips, as she was having a hard time not laughing. She knew her cousin enough to know when she was overdoing it and trying to be as attractive as possible... Tessa had always been very pretty, but she could be a real temptress when she had set her eyes on someone. Cessilia couldn’t really blame her, though. Sabaël was definitely a very attractive young man. Next to them, a little group of young women who had just walked past the gates kept stealing glances toward the very handsome guard. Only Naptunie seemed totally oblivious to the reactions her brother caused among females, or perhaps she was used to it.

“We should be able to go soon,” she said. “Uncle should have that cart here anytime now... Oh, there he is!”

Indeed, a younger boy was running in their direction, pulling a large cart with, as promised, three enormous fish lined up. He was surprisingly fast considering the load behind him, but Cessilia noticed his cart only had two large wheels instead of four large ones, and he was simply pushing a large sort of handle in front of him, the weight being balanced effortlessly behind him.

“Delivery for Nana!” he announced proudly, smiling at their little group with a missing tooth.

Nana quickly thanked him with a little coin, and turned to her brother, visibly expecting something. Sabaël frowned.

“You’re expecting me to push this?” he exclaimed. “I’m a Royal Guard, not your errand boy!”

“I won’t push it,” said Nana, crossing her arms with a pout. “This is too big for me. And the Princesses won’t push it either!”

“We can do it,” immediately offered Nupia, stepping forward with her siblings already running to grab the cart.

Those three were clearly desperate to make themselves useful, perhaps to win Cessilia’s trust. Seeing that neither Cessilia nor her cousin reacted to this, Nana nodded.

“Fine, then! I got the papers too. Shall we go now?”

Her brother sighed, now that the cart situation was solved, with two of the triplets taking charge of it, it was indeed time to go.

Just like that, their little group began moving. Sabael and the passes they had gotten from Nana’s uncle easily got them through the Inner Gate, as promised. Once they stepped outside, Cessilia realized how things were indeed already a bit different there. As Nana had said, there were already fewer shops and more habitations, so even the main alleys weren’t as busy. Moreover, the streets were a bit more narrow, as if people had tried to use all the space for their houses, while others tried to walk in between. This was so different from the Dragon Empire, where each house was far from its neighbors, or at least separated by its courtyard or a garden, and a fence...

The main difference, however, was the atmosphere around them. As soon as they had passed the gates, everything looked a bit gloomier than before. First, the numerous eyes on them, as they walked past the long line of people waiting to go in, felt a bit uncomfortable. Not only that, but people were clearly gawking at her jewelry, her skin tone, and the large cart behind them. Naptunie was also walking closer to her brother, and Sabael was glancing all around as if he was ready for something. However, nothing really looked more dangerous than a few curious glances. Everything was just a bit less busy than before, and people weren’t as cheerful, either.

“Watch out for thieves,” whispered Nana as they kept walking. “No one will dare commit a crime in the open here, but thefts are very common in this area. That’s why there are a lot fewer shops too.”

Cessilia had noticed. That, and the fact that the doors had a few more locks on them, with some even having their windows protected by metal bars, was a very curious sight. She had never seen windows with bars unless it was a prison... Still, their little group quickly made their way to the next gates without any issues. What Naptunie had warned them against ought to be a rare occurrence, unless the presence of a Royal Guard with them discouraged the few thieves around. Tessa had kept a hand on her knives all along too, but it seemed to be unnecessary, as they made it to the next gate just a few minutes later. This time, the wall was much higher and even better guarded. There was only one door open, and people seemed to come much slower than before. Unlike the previous one, where Sabael had just quickly shown the papers to his colleagues, the guards verified all the papers in detail, asked questions, and also checked the cart. While all this happened, Cessilia noticed how Nana kept sending nervous glances toward the gates.

“I’ve only been outside six times,” she explained. “Everyone wants to go inside the Inner Capital, but it’s very hard from the outside, so we don’t really go out either. Plus, it’s rather dangerous out there, so most children who are born in the Inner Capital rarely go this far out... I have people from my tribe outside, so it’s not like I can’t, but... you know, I still feel a lot better inside.”

Cessilia slowly nodded, but she was only growing more curious about what was really out there. She remembered the sights from their flight, but they had been so far above, she wanted to see for herself. In the Dragon Empire, they had always been free to go pretty much anywhere they wanted and didn’t have to worry much about their security, either. Everyone recognized the Empress’ nephews and nieces, and people genuinely loved her mother and father, so no one would dare lay a finger on her, not in the Empire. Yet now, she was also starting to feel a bit nervous, along with Nana, as they waited. Next to her, Tessa looked a bit bored, although she kept stealing glances at Sabael.

“We’re good to go,” finally announced the guard. “It’s not every day they see an Imperial Princess coming out to feed a dragon, but I think this is so

unbelievable, even though they know we wouldn't dare lie about it... Come on, let's get going, the sooner we're done, the faster we will be back inside."

Tessa and Cessilia exchanged another glance, but quietly followed him as they passed the gate.

Just as they were allowed out, Cessilia was shocked to see the white bridge outside: it was long, right above the sea, and... surprisingly empty. Aside from them, not even a dozen people were currently crossing over or trying to. She quickly understood why: on the other side of the bridge, another wall with gates stood. This one was visibly much older, and probably the one Nana had mentioned as being in dire need of repairs. In fact, she didn't even have to look far to see it; in many places, the old, dark gray bricks had been replaced with new ones, visibly newer by their light gray color. Some people were even working on it as they walked up the bridge, craftsmen on both sides loudly shouting directions and showing places, or busy with their tasks.

"Is this th-the wall that was d-destroyed?" she asked Nana.

"Yes. They are almost done repairing it now, and they are making it higher than before too because a lot of people would climb over to avoid inspection..."

Cessilia could see why. Once they were done crossing the bridge, another set of guards was there, twice as many as the other side, and once they passed the gate, an impressive line of people waiting to cross appeared; it was clear that those guards were letting people in, the others letting people out, which made the flow of travelers easier to regulate. Several people were in fact arguing with the guards controlling them, over some unauthorized merchandise, or their papers not being appropriate for crossing over.

There were now a lot more buildings, but the main activity was right against the gates, where many groups of people seemed to be stationed while waiting for the authorization to cross. There were even large stables where the horses were kept, and almost all the closest buildings were inns

and restaurants for the travelers to stay at while they waited for their papers.

Once again, their little group gathered some attention, with the gold on Cessilia, the huge fish behind them, and the Royal Guard accompanying them. However, Sabael and Nana quickly guided their little group farther away from the gates before anyone really caught on. They walked into what seemed to be the main road, with a bit of a crowd, a lot of shops, and one gigantic building with people lined up outside.

“The Travelers’ Office,” explained Nana as they walked by. “That’s the first place to go when people arrive in the Capital, to get their papers. It’s always crowded like this, and very busy...”

“One of our cousins works there,” sighed Sabael. “The pay is good, but the paperwork is so nightmarish a lot of people quit after a couple of years...”

“Can see why...” grimaced Tessa as they walked by an even more impressive line of people than those they had seen before, some of them even loudly fighting over who had come first, or their priority.

“It can’t be helped. Things really are tough out here, all those people think they can improve their lives if they move to the Capital or open a business there, but it can only accommodate so much.”

“Don’t you have other cities out there? Or how about you expand the Capital past these walls?” asked Tessa, frowning. “Our Capital is at least ten times bigger than this!”

Sabael glared back at her, which made Tessa stop her rant and close her mouth immediately. However, the Royal Guard didn’t really seem mad at her, and he sighed instead.

“You guys haven’t seen what it’s like outside. Most of the other places were ravaged by the war, and a lot are still prey to ruffians and bandits. Our King sends the army to relocate them one by one, but he can only do so much. A lot of people are scared to go back, they think they might get attacked again. Everyone believes the closer to the King and the Capital

they are, the safer it is. A lot of people would rather starve here than go back.”

This time, Tessa didn't dare answer anything again; she had understood. Cessilia felt a bit sorry for this Kingdom's people. In the Dragon Empire, there was no such desperate need for security. Even the most remote cities were doing well without the Empress because her influence wasn't just physical; no one wanted to see a dragon show up to put back order in the streets...

Nana and her brother still sped up through the streets, obviously trying to avoid any attention drawn to the pair of Imperial Princesses or their merchandise. A lot of people were staring, including some homeless ones that Cessilia spotted, more than she had ever seen in her life. Sabael didn't lie about a lot of those people being desperate...

“Hm... Where are we supposed to feed your dragon...?” Nana asked discreetly.

“D-do you have a p-place large enough for him t-to land?”

“It might be better to go to the southwest plaza then,” said Sabael. “I don't want to bring you girls any farther in the outskirts, it's too dangerous. That plaza is mostly abandoned, anyway...”

“We're not helpless, you know,” smiled Tessa. “I am one of the most skilled warriors of our Empire!”

“...They let girls fight in your Empire?” frowned Sabael.

Tessa's expression fell. She had obviously hoped to impress the Royal Guard, but his expression was probably not what she'd hoped... Cessilia glanced at her cousin and tried to speak up before she really got upset about that remark.

“It is more and more c-common, yes. D-don't you have any f-female warriors here?”

“Of course not,” retorted Sabael. “It is a man’s duty to serve and protect. It is fine for a woman to work, but who would let their wife, sister, or daughter get injured?”

“So you do want to get married?” immediately asked Tessa, who had recovered quickly. “And have children?”

“Someday, sure...”

Cessilia smiled and purposely walked a bit slower to let Tessa chat all she wanted with the guard. Meanwhile, Nana too went to her side. For a little while now, the young woman had been staring at the sky as if trying to spot something.

“So... uh... How do you call out a dragon?” she asked. “To be honest, I’m a bit nervous because I have never seen a real dragon myself, but I am a bit excited too! It must be huge, right? Since you came with it... Is it really not eating humans anymore? I mean, I am rather... appetizing, I think. It won’t be tempted, right?”

“I p-promise, he won’t,” chuckled Cessilia.

Luckily, they had arrived at the plaza before Nana could bombard her with any more of her endless questions. It was a large circular area, with white cobblestones and a couple of benches but, as Sabael had mentioned, it was mostly abandoned, except for a handful of passersby who wouldn’t even stop. In fact, Cessilia thought this place must have been beautiful in the past, although the trees around had dried out, and that old, decrepit fountain wouldn’t even show a single drop of water...

Their little group stopped, and Tessa raised her arm to gesture for everyone but Cessilia to not step any further. Meanwhile, her cousin slowly moved to the center of the plaza. It was big enough to hold the dragon indeed, as long as Krai didn’t decide to move around too much. Then, she put two fingers in the corner of her mouth, and let out a long, complex whistling song.

“...You can call a dragon like that?” whispered Nana.

“Nope, that’s just Cessi,” said Tessa. “Krai knows how to recognize her voice and her song, he wouldn’t answer anyone else the same. ...Trust me, I tried.”

Sure enough, a shadow quickly appeared in the sky. Cessilia smiled and stepped back a bit, leaving Krai room to land. In the back, Nana and her brother were both completely speechless and, of course, scared. If it wasn’t for Cessilia’s confident smile and Tessa not moving an inch either, they might have really run away. That dragon was gigantic, taking up almost all the space in a plaza that could have held two or three hundred humans, and getting bigger as it slowly landed in front of them.

Krai let out a low-pitched growl, its red eyes fixated on Cessilia. The young woman smiled brightly and walked up to the dragon, her hands behind her back. It turned its head to follow her, tilting it with curious movements.

“Krai... D-did you eat the c-cows?”

The dragon let out a faint growl and glanced to the side at the fish lined up, curious. Cessilia patted its snout, causing the dragon to lower its head again.

“You d-didn’t even get a d-drop of b-blood on you... D-don’t eat any ag-gain, p-please? We will g-give you fish now. D-do you like fish?”

The dragon’s eyes were still fixated on the cart, while Tessa sighed and went over to take the cart from the triplets. Once she got a rough understanding of how the handle balancing worked, she effortlessly pushed it all the way toward the dragon where she toppled the fresh fish at its feet under the others’ bemused eyes.

“There. Now, eat only that. Fish. Got it?” said Tessa, her hands on her hips. “No more cows, Krai, you’re on a fish-only diet!”

The Black Dragon suddenly let out a very loud and aggressive growl, clearly not too happy about the new menu.

Somewhere behind them, Nana covered her ears, frightened by that growl, and her brother jumped in front of her. Even the triplets had taken a step

back, worried and lost. However, the two girls from the Dragon Empire were still standing up to the dragon, neither of them scared in the slightest.

“Don’t be so grumpy,” protested Tessa. “You haven’t even tried it yet, you glutton!”

Krai answered with a puff of hot air from its nostrils, making both girls’ hair fly around. The Black Dragon laid down heavily, blowing clouds of dust all around and putting its head between its large paws with a continuous, faint growl. They could see the large tail angrily flipping in the air.

Cessilia chuckled and stepped forward, putting her hand on its snout with a little smile.

“D-don’t pout,” she said. “We will b-buy the most d-delicious fish for you.”

“It’s not like you’re going to die from it either,” sighed Tessa, rolling her eyes. “Honestly, you’re one cow away from fat, big guy...”

The dragon puffed the hot air out of its large nostrils again, making her grimace. Next to her, Cessilia chuckled and petted it some more.

A few steps behind, Nana and Sabael were completely speechless, and they weren’t the only ones. A handful of passersby who had inadvertently caught the scene were frozen right where they stood, unable to take their eyes off of the dragon, in a strange mix of fascination and terror. Most of the people in the Eastern Kingdom had never seen a dragon themselves, not even from afar or in books. They had very little knowledge about those creatures and had never been prepared to see one. That dragon was huge, so huge its enormous, black-scaled body seemed to take all of the available space in that little area. The beast was clearly capable of ravaging this place in a matter of seconds. In fact, the sharp, terrifying claws were already digging into the white cobblestones a bit, as if it was just butter. Its wagging tail was swishing around gusts of wind and dust, threatening to hit a building at any moment, and no one could tell if the structure could withstand that blow.

Even more impressive were the two completely relaxed young women facing that beast. They were joking and conversing as if a gigantic predator wasn't right next to them, not even two steps away. If it decided to attack, there'd be no time to run and nowhere to flee. It would be over in a matter of seconds between those terrifying fangs. However, their impossible calm was what kept people from running away themselves. The two girls were acting as if they were with some large dog or any other domesticated beast. The dragon too was acting very strangely. Completely uninterested in the humans around, the red eyes kept following the two girls with curious glances, the head even sometimes tilting a bit in an almost cute way. It didn't even try to take a bite, only staring as if it could understand what was said. This was too much to process for all the humans present.

When a long and strange growl resonated, people shivered and took a few more steps back. In fact, curiosity was the only thing keeping them from running for dear life. Who else could ever boast that they had seen a real, living dragon? Most wouldn't even believe it!

"You must b-be hungry," said Cessi with a smile.

Krai growled at first, showing its teeth, and this time, half the passersby did run, thinking that was it.

"D-don't d-decide b-before you t-try it!" sighed Cessilia, putting her hands on her hips. "C-come on, t-take a nice b-bite."

Krai finally raised its head and came to sniff the large cart placed not far away. Tessa took a couple of steps back, crossing her arms and frowning. In fact, it would have been worrying and problematic if the dragon really didn't like its new diet...

Suddenly, Krai's head dove and a savage scene began. Cessilia had to take a couple of steps back so she wouldn't be splattered by the messy eater. That was quite a disgusting scene, seeing the dragon hungrily eat up its breakfast. There were scales raining down, and from time to time, a fin would loudly splat down too. It was obvious the dragon had rarely had fish for breakfast but was enjoying it plenty. Krai would sometimes throw

a big chunk of fish in the air, and catch it in one bite before gulping it down with a satisfied growl.

Thankfully, the carnage was over in just a few seconds. Nana was horrified, and her brother didn't bother to close his mouth either. Cessilia and Tessa exchanged a look, but the older of the two kept sighing and shaking her head.

"I can't believe you made such a fuss, all for that!"

Ignoring her, Krai was meticulously licking its snout and paws, and sniffing around the cart, as if hoping to find a fourth fish hidden somewhere. Cessilia turned to Nana and her brother.

"K-Krai likes it!" she exclaimed happily.

"G-good..." muttered Nana, her body still half-frozen.

"Let's grab our stuff while he's here," said Tessa. "Now that we know where we will be staying, I don't want to have to call that guy too often, or they'll start to think we're ready to barbecue their castle..."

Cessilia nodded, and the two girls had Krai lower its body again to grab their luggage. In fact, the cart they had brought the fish with was put into use again to carry their bags and unload everything from the dragon's back. Luckily, they just had to take off some covering layer to be sure their belongings wouldn't stink of raw fish. The triplets, doing their best to regain their composure, helped the best they could and took charge of the cart once again.

When everything was taken off of its back, Krai shook with a satisfied expression, and extended its large wings to the side, as if to stretch them. Still, the dragon didn't take off, and instead, lowered its head to Cessilia's level once again. The bond between them was so clear, it could almost be seen with the bare eye. Nana was surprised to feel a bit of jealousy while seeing such a magnificent creature completely subjected to the young woman's every move. She couldn't really understand what this creature really was or why it acted so obedient toward a mere human it could have killed in seconds, but the Black Dragon visibly wouldn't have touched a

hair on the Princess' head, just as she had said. In fact, it acted almost like her cat at home, asking for attention and pets from the young woman, wrapping its tail and body around her.

“We can't keep him from flying around, but at least he won't eat your cattle now,” said Tessa, turning to the siblings.

“Are you sure...?” asked Sabael, his eyes still on the dragon, visibly unsure.

“Yeah, he's learned to stay away from the humans' farms and such. He just probably went on a hunt because he was hungry and unfamiliar with the types you raise here. Back home, he usually hunts away from the human villages, or we find him his meat.”

“M-maybe he will start fishing b-by himself now,” added Cessilia.

This wasn't actually very reassuring to Nana. Not at all. Since childhood, she had learned the patterns of fishermen and how to keep the fish near their fishing zone without scaring them away, so there would always be plenty in their nets no matter what. She could only imagine what would happen to their fishing industry if all the fish in the bay realized there was now a predator this size in the area...

“We will feed him!” she exclaimed with a smile she hoped looked confident. “I-I will let my uncles know we need to keep some prizes for your dragon, and we can give him delicious ones too!”

“Th-thank you,” smiled Cessilia, unaware of her troubles.

Nana nodded, relieved the Princess agreed to that small arrangement. Moreover, the Princesses looked like they had enough money to pay for a decade's worth of meals for the dragon! Perhaps they could keep the unsold fish of the day for the dragon, and get it used to that? Nana was already thinking of dozens of ways they could keep the carnivorous beast satiated, resolute to find a solution that would prevent anyone from being killed, or emptying their coasts.

“Alright, I think that's it,” said Tessa as they were done, checking the cart to see if everything was secured. “I guess we can go back now.”

“It would be better,” noted Sabael, looking around. “I think we might have gathered a bit too much attention now, we should hurry back to the Inner Capital, it will be safer for us all.”

Cessilia nodded, and turned to the dragon, gently patting its snout. Krai emitted a low, quiet growl in response.

“You should st-stay away from th-the human habitations, K-Krai. Alright? G-go to the beaches or where they c-can’t see you. There’s a c-coast under my room, you c-can visit me when you want.”

The dragon growled back. Nana wondered if it was just in response to her voice, or because it could actually understand the Princess’ language...

Soon enough, the dragon pushed its snout against Cessilia one more time and sat up, looking around while spreading its wings. Once it stood up in all its glory, that dragon was even taller and scarier. Nana felt her heart skip a beat. It was scary, very scary, but also impressive and amazing. The gigantic creature flapped its wings twice before taking off, leaving a large swirl of dust and wind behind. Cessilia looked up, protecting her eyes from the sun and smiling at the dark figure until it was too far up, and going farther away. Then, the Princess casually walked back to the little group.

“A d-d-dragon!” a man on the side who had been petrified by fear all this time suddenly screamed . “A dragon!”

He ran away screaming a bit ridiculously. Tessa sighed.

“Sometimes I really forget they have this effect on people. And we only came with one...”

“Do you have a lot of dragons in the Empire?” asked Nana, whose curiosity had seemed to chase all the fear away.

“J-just a few,” replied Cessilia, “b-but Krai is the b-biggest.”

“I see... Are they all black? Do they all fly? Oh, and are the others smaller because they are young then? Do you ride them all whenever you want? How high can they go?”

While Nana kept her long list of questions going without rest, their little group began leaving the place, in the same formation as before. Cessilia didn't mind Nana's questions at all and managed to give an answer here and there where she could. It was a bit funny to follow their conversation, one's speech being incredibly fast and restless, while the other was slowed down by her stutter, but did her best to answer happily and calmly.

Meanwhile, Tessa kept stealing glances at Sabael, walking closer to him with her hands behind her back, a mischievous look in her eyes.

“So... You're the first of Nana's older brothers to become a Royal Guard instead of a fisherman?”

“Yes. I was the first in my family.”

Sabael was visibly avoiding her glances a bit and tried his best to keep a serious but polite tone.

“I see... Who trained you?”

“The Royal Guards all go through the same training at the Royal Academy. We learn to use the official weapons and can graduate as soon as three years later.”

“I bet you were one of the early ones.”

This time, Tessa's confident response surprised him, enough that he dropped his serious look to finally stare at her in surprise.

“That... How did you know?”

“You have good, lean muscles. If you didn't have any before your training, they would be much more shaped than that. I spent some time with my uncles' warriors in the north, I know enough to recognize the changes someone's body went through. Plus, your tribe's people have a fish diet mostly, and you do a lot of physical tasks every day, from what we have seen so far. You probably already had the body for it, and just needed the training. With your kind of mindset, I'm sure you worked like crazy to prove even a fisherman's son could make it as a Royal Guard.”

Sabael was left completely speechless. Everything in Tessa's analysis was perfectly on point. After a second and realizing the idiotic expression he had on, he cleared his throat a little and averted his eyes. A bit too late though. The young woman had a smile on, her win written all over her face.

“So, uh... Is it common for women to fight in the Dragon Empire?”

“Not really,” shrugged Tessa. “It was my mom's belief that women should know how to defend themselves, so she had my father teach me and my sister all we needed to know for self-defense, and I just liked it a lot. I wanted to learn more, so I went to the north to learn with my cousins. They are far better than me, though; I can't measure up to them at all. They wouldn't even fight me for fun... We have a very large camp in the north, it's perfect for training. We do have more and more female soldiers now, though. The Empress has inspired many since she's probably the second-best warrior in the Empire herself... Maybe Cessi's brothers could beat her now since she's stuck in the palace all day long.”

“What about the Princess?”

“Cessi? Oh, she hates fighting. She is just like her mom, though, she is good with plants, and a master healer already. While at the camp, she spent most of her time practicing on injured soldiers.”

Sabael nodded, his eyes going to Cessilia's figure. The Princess looked very innocent in her gestures indeed, but she had a well-toned and defined body, although skinnier than her cousin. She definitely knew some rudiments of fighting as well, in Sabael's opinion.

Next to him, Tessa frowned, a bit unhappy by the attention directed at her cousin instead of her. However, she didn't have time to say anything. While between two buildings, men suddenly came out from streets ahead and behind them, swords in their hands, to block their paths. Immediately, the triplets moved, two of them in front of Cessilia and Nana, the last one at the rear. Sabael too drew his sword.

“What's this?” scoffed Tessa, glancing at both sides. “An ambush?”

“Stay behind me, ladies,” said Sabael, very serious. “These felons are experts at trapping people like this and robbing them of their possessions.”

“You thought that gold wouldn’t catch some attention?!” scoffed one of them. “Leave your possessions and the Dragon girls here and perhaps we will let the rest of you leave.”

“Wait, what do you want us for?” exclaimed Tessa, putting a hand on her hip.

“The Dragon people have ravaged our Empire! We shall kill you and send your guts back to your wretched Empire!”

“...You do realize the two of us weren’t even born back then, right?” scoffed Tessa.

“We heard you call the other woman Princess! A member of the Imperial Family, here!”

Tessa glanced up at where the voices had come from. There were four more men on the roofs... She grimaced, annoyed that she had missed them. On the other side, Cessilia pushed Nana behind her, glaring at the men present.

“Cessilia, Nana, make sure you stay against the wall! Hey, handsome, how many of those do you think you can handle? Need my help?”

“I can fend for myself!” retorted Sabael, immediately outraged. “I don’t need a girl protecting me.”

“I’m a woman, love. You’d better remember that for later. What about you, triplets?” she asked, swirling her swords in her hands and moving to the front of their group.

“We can defend ourselves and the Princess, but we are not used to frontal battles...” admitted Nupia.

So those three were assassins more than fighters. As expected of the King’s spies, thought Tessa. Still, she swung her swords once more before getting into position.

“Cessi, stay right where you are, okay?”

“D-don’t k-kill them, T-Tessa,” said Cessilia, visibly worried. “We c-can’t k-kill people here...”

“I know,” said her cousin with a smile. “After all, it’s our first day here, it wouldn’t be very... courteous.”

Just like that, Tessa didn’t wait one more second and jumped on the men ahead, incredibly fast.

Naptunie was worried but before she could panic even more, a hand appeared to cover her eyes.

“It will b-be over soon,” gently muttered Cessilia’s voice.

Nana grabbed her hand for comfort but didn’t push it away. She couldn’t see, but she could hear some of what was going on. Indeed, things were going extremely fast in that little alley. Following Cessi’s instruction, Tessa was careful not to kill those men, although she knew those ruffians wouldn’t have this much restraint toward her. Still, this was an easy fight for her. Using the flat part of Darsan’s blades, she quickly made sure to knock the men out, or send them flying toward the wall opposite her cousin. She grimaced when the second man’s skull made a sickening sound.

“I forgot their walls are made of harder stones...” she grimaced.

She didn’t have time to check if he was alive or dead. The four men on the roof jumped down and Tessa moved to be ready to welcome them, glancing to the side to check the rest of her surroundings. As promised, the triplets were doing a decent job of protecting Cessilia, Nana, and the cart. At the rear of their group, Sabael was just as impressive. His style was definitely a bit stiffer, and following some precise movements, Tessa could have learned just from observing him, but he was doing a great job against those inexperienced men. She smiled, a bit enticed by the sweat on his biceps, his serious expression, and his sharp attacks.

Sadly, she didn’t have much time to gaze at Sabael’s superb figure during this fight; a fraction of a second later, another sword was thrown at her, and she had to focus to block it.

“You guys are ruining our first date,” she hissed at them.

Pissed, she was even more dangerous and faster too. Tessa perfectly balanced her fighting style between the two swords of her cousin, while keeping a feminine elegance to her moves, flying and spinning around as if it was a deadly dance. In fact, Cessilia noted with amusement what her cousin missed: the couple of times Sabael glanced her way, probably more impressed than he'd be willing to admit. More enemies had appeared in front, and since he was supported by one of the triplets, his fights were over before Tessa's. That allowed him a few seconds to observe her perfect twin-swords fighting skills before she finished, not a graze on her, and all her enemies knocked out on the ground. Tessa slowly caught her breath and removed some of her hair from her cheeks, where they were stuck by sweat. She glanced back up, watching out for more thieves on the roof, but everything seemed quiet.

“I think it's over,” she said to Nana and Cessilia. “Those idiots... To think they'd be able to attack us. If one of my cousins had been here, they'd be dead!”

Cessilia lowered her hand and Naptunie dared to look around, still a bit afraid. She wasn't used to violence at all; in fact, it scared her a lot just watching her older brother train. She was thankful Cessilia had covered her eyes in time. She took several deep breaths while the Princess walked over to the men, looking at their unconscious bodies.

“T-Tessa, you used a lot of s-strength,” she noted, glancing at the one knocked out against the wall.

“It's Darsan's swords,” grimaced Tessa. “They are heavier than I'm used to, I need to use more strength to wield them, and without thinking I... Oh, well. At least we managed not to kill them... I think. What do you want to do, handsome? Shall we tie them up and bring them to your post or whatever?”

“No need,” Sabael shook his head. “We don't arrest people here, we just... try to stop them like this.”

“...Excuse me, they tried to rob us,” protested Tessa. “Isn’t there some sort of judgment that’s supposed to happen? Are all your prisons full or something? If it was the Dragon Empire, they would not just get to walk away like that! ...When they wake up that is. Cessi, can you check if that guy is alive? I’m freaking out a little...”

Cessillia chuckled, but walked to the man to check if he was still breathing. He would have a very serious headache at the very least... Sabael sighed.

“We’re in the Outer Capital, there isn’t much we can do here. If we had been on the other side of the wall, sure, but... there are just too many criminals here. We don’t arrest them anymore, since we discovered some people got arrested on purpose to get to the other side. Normally, we kill them right on the spot if they really are dangerous and citizens are encouraged to... defend themselves by any means too. Since we knocked them out, though, I don’t think we should kill them now... I think they are mere thieves, lured by the Princess’ gold.”

“Wow. That sure saves some paperwork...” scoffed Tessa, putting her blades back. “If I had known, I would have cut their hands off, or at least a finger or two. It’s the usual judgment in the Dragon Empire.”

“You guys are barbaric...” muttered Sabael.

“And you’re lazy,” retorted Tessa.

While the two of them bickered some more, Cessilia smiled, amused by their banter. All these men were alive and would survive this. She sighed. In fact, she didn’t feel too good about what had happened. Those men had attacked them although they couldn’t have missed the presence of a dragon nearby. They had to be really desperate for money... and lured more by the gold than their own lives’ values. She knew her home country wasn’t responsible for this Kingdom’s misery, but they sure hadn’t done anything to help, either. Cessilia stood back up and walked back to their little group, one less gold ring in her hair.

“We should head back quickly before something else happens,” said Sabael, glancing around with a frown. “I wouldn’t be surprised if more people noticed your presence here.”

They all agreed to hurry back with the cart to the gates. Cessilia noticed how Nana stayed close to her, instead of her older brother, all this time. In fact, Sabael had some blood on his armor, as his fight had been messier than Tessa’s. He wasn’t injured but certainly didn’t look as well put together as previously.

Luckily, with the passes from the Dorosef Tribe and Sabael vouching for them, they had no issues crossing the gates to get back inside. The Royal Guards didn’t even dare go through the Princess’ belongings as soon as Nupia stepped up to forbid them from it. It seemed like a Royal Servant’s words could outweigh a Royal Guard’s authority... Once they stepped on the bridge and were on the way back to the Greater Capital, Nana looked a bit more relaxed and smiled again. It seemed like the fight from before had really frightened her, but now, she felt safe enough to glance up at the sky, as if she was hoping to spot a dragon flying.

“Nana,” said Cessilia. “C-can you show me around your favorite b-boutiques later? I really like your b-bracelets.”

“Oh, of course! I can show you the best ones in town and even where to get the prettiest dresses, jewelry, and shoes! One of my cousins also just began her collection of shell boxes, they are so pretty! I’m sure you will love it!”

“We need to drop by the castle to put all that in our room,” sighed Tessa, pointing at their cart, “and I guess we need to send the cart back to your family.”

“If you stay within the Inner Capital,” said Nupia. “My younger siblings can take it back to the castle for you, ladies. Is the Royal Guard going to stay with us...?”

She glanced at Sabael, strongly hinting that he should. Tessa jumped on the occasion to get next to Sabael with a bright smile.

“Of course, he will! Two guides are better than one, right?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered, trying to step away from Tessa. “I had hoped to train today...”

“You can train as a princess’ bodyguard,” she retorted. “From what I saw earlier, you could get better at it and it’s not like we will be completely safe in the Inner Capital without a proper escort, right?”

Sabael blushed, but despite his pride being a bit hurt by her words, he had nothing to answer to that. In fact, he felt a bit defeated that Tessa’s fighting skills were obviously better than his and he couldn’t beat a girl against ruffians after all he had said previously. Hence, he decided not to answer and just nodded, a frown between his eyebrows.

“It’s settled, then!” said Tessa, obviously the happiest about his decision. “By the way, can you get me a room too? I get Cessilia’s place is grand but I only saw one bed, and I could use some privacy too. Like, without you three around.”

“I understand,” said Nupia, visibly impervious to Tessa’s snarky remarks. “We will make sure the closest room to the Princess is ready for you.”

Then, they separated from two of the triplets, who left on their own to get back more quickly to the castle. While they weren’t yet at the Inner Gate, Nana had begged them to make a detour by another of her cousin’s shops for food again. While they walked up to the said spot, Cessilia discreetly got closer to her cousin.

“D-didn’t you p-plan to st-tay with me?” she asked in a whisper.

“From what I’ve seen, not everyone will be as welcoming as Nana. I don’t like the idea of someone staying next door to us, namely those other candidates, when that castle is so freaking tiny. Also, what if that King does get closer to you? I don’t want to have to close my eyes and ears!”

Cessilia chuckled at her cousin’s exasperation, but Tessa did have a point. It would perhaps be better to make sure no one could wander to her apartments and she knew the triplets would find a close room for Tessa, as they had seen a couple of doors on their way there. However, she did

have a hunch that Tessa's sudden interest in getting her own room wasn't about her cousin's relationship with the King but about her own interest in a certain Royal Guard...

Still completely unaware of Tessa's vivid interest in her brother, Nana showed them where to get some smoked fish rolls with cream and that seaweed they had already tried before. Once again, the tastes were completely new to their palates, which made the young ladies happier. In fact, more than the food, Cessilia was deeply intrigued by all the uses those people had for seaweed. She had even seen shops selling different varieties, some dried or not, even as flakes and powders. She interrogated Nana about this while they were waiting to pass the Inner Gate.

"Oh, we use a lot of seaweed!" exclaimed Nana. "Well, we have plenty of it and some families have specialized in seaweed farming too!"

"You have farms of seaweed?" repeated Tessa, surprised.

"Yes! They are used for food like here, but a lot of people also buy them to make other things like nets, fertilizer, soap... Oh, I heard they use it in some beauty products too, but those are expensive. Ah, and there are some medicinal uses too!"

"In m-medicine?" repeated Cessilia, immediately intrigued.

"Yes! I don't know too much about it, though, and medicine is heavily regulated... but we can go to one of the apothecary shops and ask around! I'm sure they'll know plenty!"

Cessilia nodded in agreement, very interested to hear more about this. Her undying love for knowledge was easily triggered by information such as this, and since seaweed wasn't common in the Empire, she was twice as curious as usual.

Although, since Nana wasn't particularly knowledgeable on the matter, they agreed to find an apothecary to visit later. It wasn't like they had to do everything the first day after all, but Nana did seem pretty enthusiastic about taking them everywhere she could. In fact, as soon as they were back inside the Inner Capital, she guided them for a long, long shopping

tour around the streets. It was as if she really knew each and every citizen living there, and the products they sold in their shops. Some she only showed them, and some she insisted they tried. A lot of those were food, though, so both Cessilia and Tessa had to soon beg her to not feed them anymore, for they were already very full.

Luckily, there was a lot more than just food offered among the many shops. Aside from all the delicacies, the shops had many choices of jewelry, pottery, woodwork, embroideries, fabrics, plants, skins and furs, and clothes. Nana proudly introduced them to all the elite craftsmen of the Kingdom, for the greatest ones were inevitably selling their best products in the Inner Capital, where the wealthy population was. As soon as they spotted Cessilia and Tessa and their attire, a lot of merchants were trying to have them visit their shops, delivering their best sales speeches in hopes to get some of that gold. In fact, this was when Nana proved to be the most helpful. She would get upset as soon as she heard of how the sellers were inflating their prices to trick the two women or lying about their products, and she didn't let anything through.

“You lying old trout!” she shouted after hearing one man's speech to Cessilia. “Brand new what? That pattern was already outdated three years ago! You're only good at copying other popular patterns from the best shops! Come on, Lady Cessilia, let's get out of here. You should be ashamed, you smelly whelk!”

“What in the world is a whelk...?” muttered Tessa to Cessi as the young woman pushed them both outside.

“I can't believe it!” Nana kept groaning once they were back in the street. “This is the eleventh time I've caught one of them lying to your faces! Cunning sharks! Just because you're rich strangers, they are multiplying their prices by two or three times what they'd normally sell it for and selling you those bad products! What kind of image does it give you of our Kingdom? So annoying!”

“It's not that b-bad,” said Cessilia.

“No, Nana is right,” said Sabael. “Your outfits and gold are bringing too much attention, a lot of people here are desperate for any money they can make.”

“Nana, c-can you have some nice c-clothes made for us?” asked Cessilia. “It would p-perhaps make th-things easier...”

“I don’t like this,” grumbled Tessa. “I like my clothes, I don’t want to have to change...”

“We will have less t-trouble that way. For Nana t-too.”

Although she was still upset, her cousin shrugged, not wanting to oppose Cessilia on this. Next to them, Nana nodded.

“For sure! If you want really pretty dresses, I know exactly which shop we should go to! They work fast, and are renowned for their work too! If we get your measurements to them today, I’m sure they can have something ready in just a few days.”

“Alright,” sighed Tessa. “Let’s go there to get them done as soon as possible, and then go back to the castle. If someone tries to scam us again, I might really take a finger or two...”

Nana grimaced, probably wondering if Tessa would seriously consider amputating someone, but she didn’t dare ask. Their little group went to the shop Nana had mentioned, which, fortunately, seemed much more honest and welcoming. While Sabael stood guard outside and refused to enter, the three girls were all treated like princesses. The shop workers were visibly used to prestigious customers, and their attitude became twice as polite when they saw Cessilia’s jewelry. They offered them tea while Tessa stood first on the little stool for her measurements to be taken, two young girls jumping around her with their rulers and announcing numbers while an older lady took notes.

“I want something pretty,” declared Tessa. “...Nana, does your brother have a favorite color?”

“Sab?” said Nana, looking surprised. “Uh... I don’t really know... Why?”

“Nevermind,” sighed Tessa. “Just make it comfortable to move around, please. Nothing too tight or impractical.”

“What is this?” a voice suddenly came from the entrance of the shop.

“Lady Safia, I’m very sorry, but since you didn’t come at your appointed time, we thought—”

“Excuse me? Are you pretending this is my fault? I had an appointment, and it turns out you gave it to someone else? Who the heck dares to...?!”

The woman vociferating abruptly walked into the shop, glaring at Tessa where she stood. Then, her eyes went to Cessilia and Nana. Immediately, her expression changed into a scornful look.

“Ha! You’re saying these miscreants are the ones who took my appointment? How dare you serve those crummy foreigners before me! I’m Safia of the Yekara Clan, daughter of the Clan Leader himself!”

“...And queen of loudmouths?” scoffed Tessa.

The woman did not appreciate Tessa’s snicker. She immediately turned her black eyes to her, furious. It was obvious she came from a very wealthy family, from her luxurious dress, the two servant girls following her, and the many pieces of silver jewelry displayed on her neck, arms, and hair. Her hair was very long, down to her thighs, and styled into dozens of thin braids. She wore simple makeup and was undoubtedly pretty even without that. However, right now, her face was distorted by anger, her lips in an annoyed rictus.

“You should learn to show respect, foreigner girl,” she hissed. “This isn’t your country, you’re nothing here! No one wants you here, either!”

“Seems to me you’re the unwanted one, you tardy bitch.”

Cessilia sighed. She had no intention to get into a fight with any of the candidates, she hated those kinds of catfights and attitudes. Tessa, however, was prone to react to insults, and surely wouldn’t remain quiet about this... Despite her seemingly calm tone, she could tell when her cousin was really pissed. This could get out of hand if she didn’t watch it.

Next to her, Nana looked a bit worried, her eyes going back and forth from one woman to the other.

The one most panicked by the situation was undeniably the shop owner; the poor woman almost ran to Safia's side, looking on the verge of tears.

"My deepest apologies for this situation! It is entirely our fault for assuming my lady wanted to cancel your appointment. Lady Safia, please, we will happily take you now, if you can just wait a few minutes..."

"You want me to wait?" scoffed Safia. "Are you seriously thinking of serving these women while we wait? Are you daft? Have you forgotten who I am? What's my family's name?"

Tessa rolled her eyes at her and let out a loud sigh, exasperated.

"No, no, no, of course not, my lady. We will serve you right away. Let us take you to the other room, and..."

"I am not going to any other room," said Safia, crossing her arms. "I want this one, and those foreigners out. Now!"

Her shrieks echoed in the room like a raven's squawk. The poor shop owner was visibly doing her best to please both customers but also terrified to anger either. Seeing how calm Safia's servants were, this wasn't a rare occurrence either. As she kept screaming, Cessilia sighed and stood up.

"Let's g-go," she said calmly.

"B-but..." mumbled Nana, visibly upset about the situation as well.

Cessilia gently helped her up, showing she was resolute in leaving that place. Back on the stool, her arms still crossed, Tessa rolled her eyes, but still followed Cessilia's lead, and began taking off the fabric she was trying on.

"That's right," scoffed Safia. "You scram, and don't you come into my sight again!"

"Or what?"

Cessilia's strangely composed tone took the woman by surprise. Not only that, but she had stopped walking on her way out, when they were crossing paths, to stare right at her with those frank, green eyes. In a second, the Yekara woman felt an instinctive surge of fear and stepped back. Something in the foreigner's eyes had just triggered her most basic survival instincts and made her move away from the Princess. ...However, Cessilia was not showing any sign of aggression, and she immediately regretted stepping back without thinking, wondering where that had come from. She tried to regain her composure, but the Princess was still staring, visibly waiting for an answer. Safia cleared her throat, trying to regain her former arrogant attitude.

"I'll get rid of you," scoffed Safia. "I'll make sure you can never step foot in the Inner Capital again. My family is the Yekara Clan, the most powerful of all. This is not your Empire, a little princess like you has no power here!"

A silent second passed, and Nana stepped forward, getting angry this time.

"You can't use your family's power against a foreign princess! How dare you talk to Lady Cessilia like that, Safia! Your family's only good at bullying people and extorting money!"

"And what is your family good at?" she retorted with a smirk. "Gutting smelly fish? Selling fat beignets? Just shut up and fuck off, Dorosef girl."

Nana clenched her little fists, and Tessa clicked her tongue, annoyed. However, Cessilia, to their surprise, simply took Nana's hand and walked out without giving that girl another glance. The three of them left the shop, hearing Safia's shouting at the shop owner even from outside.

Sabael, who had been waiting outside, walked up to them frowning. He had probably heard the situation but decided not to intervene.

"What in the world was that?!" stormed Tessa, furious. "What an arrogant bitch! Cessi, you should have let me cut that big throat of hers!"

"You really shouldn't," sighed Nana. "She was telling the truth, earlier. Her family is so rich, they own a lot of the shops around, and they have

so much money, they scare everyone. Safia is always using that power to get everything she wants, and since she's the family head's only daughter, they are forever spoiling her. She's known for throwing tantrums like this wherever she goes..."

"If you managed to ignore her, that's great," added her brother. "Several people have already lost their shops because of that girl. She just needs to complain, and the rent will be increased tenfold so the people have no choice but to leave... I've seen it happen many times."

"I hate those types of people the most," grumbled Tessa. "Abusing her power and money to get her way... She's just a rich brat with no manners! If this was the Dragon Empire, she'd never get away with that kind of attitude! Who does she think she is, she's just using her daddy's money to scare people! And to think we abolished slavery. Looks like some people still hold the whip around here!"

This time, Sabael's eyes were wide open, the young man visibly impressed by Tessa's words. Cessilia wondered if he had thought of them as just a duo of willful princesses... Sadly, Tessa did not catch the soldier's gaze on her, once again. She was glaring at the entrance of the shop, shaking her head as they could still hear Safia mistreating the workers. She kept her hands on her swords as if she was dying to go back inside and teach a violent lesson.

"...Why did we let her get away with it again?" grumbled Tessa, finally turning to Cessilia.

"We d-don't need t-to fight her. Nothing t-too b-bad happened... Let's not c-cause issues for the p-people here."

She slowly walked away from the shop first, and without looking back, headed in the castle's direction. Behind her, Nana and Tessa exchanged a surprised glance, finally understanding. Cessilia had stepped down because of the shop owner and their workers. It was clear the woman was torn between the customers and trying to treat the foreign Princess decently despite Safia's tantrum. Cessilia had simply chosen to not risk someone else's business... Tessa glanced at Nupia, who had been quietly

following them all this time, silent as a shadow. It was clear she wouldn't get involved unless the Princess was in danger, otherwise, she would have said something earlier. Still, the servant probably hadn't missed anything from the earlier scene, and perhaps she would relay it all to her real master. There was no way Cessilia hadn't noticed that as well... Seeing her cousin's lonely figure ahead of them, a smile already back on her lips, Tessa finally let go of her swords, and shook her head.

"Ever your mother's daughter," she chuckled to herself.

A bit less unsatisfied now that they both knew Cessilia's reason for letting Safia get the upper hand, Nana and Tessa joined her, and the three girls made their way back to the castle, Sabael and Nupia behind them. Without realizing it, their little outing to the Outer Capital and all the wandering around the shops had taken almost a full day. The Capital of the Eastern Kingdom was smaller than the one they were used to, but also more packed. They had seen many, many different streets and visited a lot of shops in just a few hours, with less walking needed than if they had done the same amount in the Dragon Empire. It was high time they got home, indeed, since they had promised the Counselors they'd be back by dusk.

However, as they finally reached the gates, Sabael stopped, clearing his voice a bit loudly.

"Uh, well, I have to go now, ladies. Nana, let me know if you want to go outside the Inner Wall again, alright?"

"Got it! Thanks, Sab!" answered his little sister with a big smile.

She was already waving at him, but it was a bit too soon to part for someone else...

"Don't you want to have dinner with us?" offered Tessa with her brightest smile, the previous ordeal already forgotten.

"No, thanks. My next shift begins soon, actually. But, uh... It was nice meeting you... I mean, accompanying you, ladies. Escorting, you. That's right, meeting and escorting you, uh..."

Seeing Sabael mumble and struggle to answer Tessa's disarming smile was unbearably cute. Both Cessilia and Nana kept exchanging glances, the first one amused and the other one a bit confused, although she seemed to finally realize the situation that was going on there. The soldier was making no movement to actually leave and Tessa was still there, visibly hopeful. The two of them were so awkward it was almost painful to watch. Finally, Cessilia faked a little cough to get their attention.

"T-Tessa, d-didn't you want t-to see their armory?"

"Oh, right!" exclaimed her cousin. "Hey, can I see the soldiers' armory? Please?"

A bit flustered, Sabael seemed to ponder his answer for a few seconds, but Tessa wasn't leaving him much room to say no. Even after sweating a bit from their fight earlier and running around all day to shop, Tessa still looked incredibly pretty, with her green dress and captivating smile. Eventually, he nodded.

"I guess it's fine... if it's just for a bit..."

"Great!"

Before he could even react, she turned to Cessilia to give her a little wink, mimicking a thanks with her lips, and then grabbed Sabael's arm to pull him back downtown. For a little while, Nana and Cessilia stayed there, watching the two leave, one a bit more enthusiastic than the other.

"So... is Tessa interested in my brother, by any chance?" finally asked Nana, a frown on.

"I b-believe so," chuckled Cessilia.

"Oh... Oh, good luck to her, then. Sabael is really stubborn, and I've never seen him with a girlfriend yet... Although he is really popular, you know. My sisters' friends always want to try to get with him, but he rejects them every time. He is too serious to date, I think."

"Well, maybe T-Tessa will help change his mind about d-dating?"

“That would be good!” nodded Nana. “Oh, let’s go now! I can ask my uncle to make us dinner, he’s a very good cook, you know! That’s why my auntie married him.”

“Your uncle seems t-to b-be a very nice man,” said Cessilia as they walked back inside the castle.

“Oh, he really is the sweetest, and my favorite uncle too! I was the only one of my siblings to like books so much, so my uncle was the one who helped me read more and always gifted me tons of books. He taught me a lot himself, and convinced my mom to let me be his apprentice! I would have probably liked to work in one of my family businesses too, but I do really love a good book... I think snacks and books are my two favorite things in the world!”

“I love b-books t-too,” nodded Cessilia.

“I will show you around the Royal Libraries later! My uncle and I are always there... but let’s let him know we’re home first! Otherwise, he and Uncle Yassim will worry...”

As promised, the two young women went in search of the Counselors; however, it seemed Yassim had left already. Cessilia was a bit worried to hear that, but Yamino promised the old man would be back soon, although he didn’t explain why the other Counselor had left, nor mention where he’d gone.

Naptunie quickly told her uncle everything that had happened, although it probably took much longer than if she had stuck to the most important facts rather than detailing everything they had seen, eaten, or drunk... Eventually, her uncle managed to have her stop by promising he would indeed cook them dinner as soon as Tessa would return, and asked her to get him a couple of ingredients from the kitchen. When the young woman happily left, the old man let out a long sigh.

“Oh, I love that child, but she’s got way too much going on in that pretty head,” he chuckled. “I hope you enjoyed today’s outing, Princess. Yassim and I were curious to hear your thoughts.”

“It was nice, th-thank you,” nodded Cessilia. “Nana and her b-brother were very k-kind t-to show us everything...”

“Sab’s a nice boy for sure. I looked exactly like him when I was younger!”

“R-really?” chuckled Cessilia, thinking about her cousin’s date...

“Oh, for sure! I had a dream of becoming a knight too, but it’s harder than it seems, and I’m much more suited for books! Anyway, my lady must be tired after all this. I’ll let you go and catch some rest in your room before dinner, I promise to keep Nana occupied so you can rest quietly!”

“Th-thank you, Counselor.”

Cessilia found it adorable how Yamino spoke so fondly about his niece. In fact, she was already beginning to miss her own family a bit... It became even more true as she walked back silently to her room, with only the sound of Nupia’s steps behind her. She had almost grown accustomed to the servant’s shadowy presence behind her, but it still inconvenienced her a little.

When she put her hand on the doorknob, Cessilia froze.

“N-Nupia.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“I want t-to b-be alone, for now,” she said.

“...I understand. I’ll see if Lady Tessa’s room is ready...”

Quietly, Nupia walked back in the opposite direction to leave her.

Her hand still on the warm handle, Cessilia let out a faint sigh, her heart beating a little faster already. She slowly opened it, a bit nervous.

Her room was almost as she had left it, except that their stuff had been left by the bed, clearly for them to decide what they wanted to do with it. The Princess took a few more steps inside, something still making the back of her neck tingle. Beyond the balcony’s rail, the sun was already starting to set behind the sea. It gave her a marvelous vision of the sky taking new

shades of yellow, orange, and purple, but Cessilia couldn't enjoy them right now.

Her green eyes went around the room until she finally saw him. Standing opposite her, almost in the shadow of one of the pillars. His manly figure was standing out in this perfect room, the shine of his armor reflecting the sunlight and sending colors around the room, against the shimmery nacre. His white hair made him impossible to miss. He slowly stepped forward, and Cessilia's heart rate helplessly went up again. Something appeared in her throat, a painful knot she couldn't get rid of. A lot of feelings surged inside but none could reach her lips. There was something between them, just like before, in the throne room. Not even the sunset could be as beautiful as the way they looked at each other, and yet, they were both scared to approach, like two young animals wary of one another.

Finally, he took a step forward. Cessilia was torn between running up to him and running away. The look in his eyes was much too complex to decipher. Something like anger, confusion, and... pain.

"...You shouldn't have come here," he hissed.

Cessilia took a deep breath, his voice reaching her like a cold blade in her heart. She had made her decision long ago, and she was holding on tight to that resolve to face him. Her lips were twitching helplessly, and she could feel that familiar, scary tingle in her fingers. Her shortness of breath, that sensation climbing up her neck, all too familiar. Still, she struggled, all she could, to get that word past her lips.

The things she wanted to say, all embedded into one, unique word.

"...Ashen."

His eyes twitched slightly, and the trouble could be seen in his expression. He reacted to his own name being called with a frown. Something in his eyes was a bit scary, but also fearful. He didn't know what to do with her, and the anger in his eyes wasn't as convincing as he had tried to make it, either. His fists, clenched by his side, were slightly shaking as if they contained too many emotions for him to handle.

With difficulty Cessilia tried to clear her throat a little; however, the knot didn't go away.

"Ashen..." she repeated again, about to step forward.

"Don't call me like that."

His cold answer stopped her in her tracks, and she froze, feeling the tension and anger in his voice. He was really glaring at her this time, his lips pinched with a disdainful expression.

"Don't call me that," he repeated. "What are you doing here, Cessilia? Why did you come all the way here?"

His question came like a hammer, echoing in the room like heavy accusations of a crime. She tried to take a deep breath in and answer him calmly.

"T-to see you."

"Don't you lie to me. You made it clear you didn't want to see me anymore when our paths diverged, didn't you? Or should I remind you what happened that night?"

Cessilia felt a blow to her heart and the pain of that memory. She knew why he was angry, and she knew he was right to be. It didn't change her feelings though.

Ashen averted his eyes, staring outside instead as if he couldn't bear to look at her anymore.

"Why did you come here? Does your father know?"

"Yes..."

"Ha," he scoffed bitterly, "I should have known. Why the hell did he send you now, Cessilia? What does he want? To keep me in check, after what he did to me? Is he afraid I'm going to attack your Empire again? Is that what it is? He sent you here to taunt me?"

"N-no!" shouted Cessilia, panicked to hear him speculate so fast. "N-no, Ashen, I swear, th-that's not what it is."

“Don’t lie, Cessilia, not to me. Why would you have come with his dragon, then? Why Krai? ...Where is Cece?”

She stepped back as if he had hit her. His accusing look wasn’t enough to scare her, but it was painful. Yet, not as painful as that name. She slowly shook her head.

“She d-didn’t c-come...” she painfully muttered, short of breath.

She couldn’t even utter that name. She hadn’t heard it in a long time, and she hadn’t pronounced it at all for even longer... Each time, she didn’t want to remember it, to go through that pain again. Her heart was beating so fast, wreaking havoc in her chest and making her feel a bit dizzy. Cessilia helplessly shook her head. She mentally cursed her stuttering that kept her from explaining to him, from telling him the truth, that she had only come here for him, and with her dad’s blessing. Not to wage war at all, but instead, see if there was still a bond between them... that bond that had been broken a long time ago.

“Ashen, I p-promise, I d-didn’t–”

“Stop doing that!” he yelled.

“W-what?”

“That thing, with your voice. Are you trying to make me feel pity for you? What the hell is wrong with your voice, it wasn’t like that before... No, I don’t want to know, I don’t want to hear it.”

“Ashen!” she shouted, frustrated.

It was getting a bit harder to breathe, and she felt like crying. This wasn’t going the way she had hoped at all... He was wary of her, and she knew it would happen, but she could barely talk. She couldn’t stop stuttering enough to explain herself, and the more nervous and frustrated she got, the worse it would be.

He sighed, visibly calming down, and a little light of hope appeared in her heart. If he could just listen to her a bit... But Ashen slowly shook his head, brushing his white hair back with a tired expression.

“Enough, Cessilia. You should... You should go home. I don’t think I can handle you being here anymore. Please, just... go.”

He turned around, to avoid looking at her, directing his steps toward the door.

Everything was happening so fast in her head. She had to do something to stop him. She didn’t want to go home; not now, not today, not so soon. She still had so much to explain to him, and she didn’t want to go back to before. She couldn’t stand the idea of losing him again. Not this time. She had promised herself so many times, dreamed a thousand times of when they’d see each other again. Sometimes it felt like a fleeting dream that would never happen, and sometimes, it felt like she just had to cross that border between their countries. She had thought him to be dead, so many times too. Back then, all she could think of was that she’d be satisfied if he was alive and well. Now that he was here, and alive, she knew she had lied to herself; this much just wasn’t enough.

She stepped forward, fighting that knot in her throat with all of her strength, to get out those words. Something, anything to hold him back. It wasn’t coming. It was stuck in her tight throat and in her twitching lips, her mouth numb. She wanted to cry and shout in frustration, but even that felt cruelly hard. He reached the doors, his back about to disappear. Then, something broke in her, snapped in two by all the distress she was going through.

“D-don’t you love me anymore?” she asked, almost a cry.

Ashen froze with one hand on the handle. The door wasn’t opened yet, he was just about to push it. A voice called from outside the bedroom, something unintelligible Cessilia couldn’t understand, but that made him close the door again.

Her heart was going fast, way too fast. She could almost feel the blood rushing to her extremities, making her numb in some parts. She was holding on to that vision of Ashen’s back, and the fact that he wasn’t gone yet. Instead, he was stuck in that heavy silence between them. Cessilia stepped forward, almost worried she would miss his answer. She couldn’t

see his face, blocked by his white hair in between. He then turned his head, but now, she couldn't see his eyes, just the edge of his lips and nose. He opened his mouth, slowly.

“I...”

Whatever he wanted to say next, it didn't come out, his sentence remained suspended between them, that troubled tone in his voice serving only as a clue. That was all Cessilia wanted. Some hope.

She moved forward, not thinking about anything anymore. In just a few seconds, she closed the distance between them, feeling the bravery of a dragon inside her. She reached Ashen, and without any warning, she put her lips on his. This was a gesture she wouldn't have dared to dream of just seconds ago, but now, something was changing inside her. Her voice was broken, but not her body. Her hand on his cheek, the other on his arm, she just kissed him, putting all of her feelings into that shy, fragile kiss.

Ashen's lips opened slightly. She couldn't tell if it was to breathe or to taste more of her. Cessilia slowly pulled back, watching his expression, that feeling lingering on her lips.

The look in Ashen's eyes was all she wanted to know. That breach in his armor, that almost frightened look meant she had reached something deep inside. He was letting down his cold and ruthless demeanor to show the young man she had known once before, the one she had missed so much it hurt.

“...Never do that again.”

He fled the room as fast as he could, leaving Cessilia there.

When reality hit her again, she exhaled all at once, staggering and stumbling back, her body going numb again. It was such that she dropped down to her knees, trying to catch her breath, massaging her chest, hoping her heart would calm down too. Cessilia had to lean against the door for a few minutes, just trying to recuperate. Despite her physical distress, something in her heart was a bit brighter, and she felt a little bit more confident, a faint smile even appearing on her lips.

Then, she heard a faint growl coming from the other side. She brushed her curls back and turned her head, seeing Krai's big head shyly appearing behind the rail. Cessilia smiled and slowly stood up, helping herself by using the wall on the side, and walked over. Its head was trying to go higher than the balcony, so it could get in, but there was no way the dragon's body would ever fit in the suite. When Cessilia reached the balcony, she glanced outside and noticed it was indeed trying to climb up the cliff, its lower body in the water. Krai probably struggled to fly to that place and had to dig its claws into the cliff to have a stable position to peek. She smiled, and sat on the rail, leaning forward to caress the big dark snout.

"Were you worried...?" she muttered. "I'm f-fine..."

The dragon's warm scales under her hand were very comforting. Cessilia gave in, leaning even further, until her upper body rested on the dragon's head, her hand between its eyes. Feeling her father's dragon was both heart-warming and a bit saddening. When she heard Krai growl softly again, Cessilia felt her lower lip twitch a bit.

"I miss her t-too..."

Cessilia's tears fell down silently. She didn't want to think about Cece, but now, it was inevitable. She closed her eyes, crying silently and feeling the dragon's warmth under her, imagining it was her own...

"Lady Cessilia...?"

The shy knocks on the door woke her up from her half-drowsy state. Cessilia slowly rose up, gently pushed by Krai too, and saw Nana fidgeting at the entrance of the suite. The young woman looked worried and was holding a large drink in her hands.

"Oh, Sir Dragon is here too! Hi, again!"

Krai tilted its large head, visibly curious about the little Dorosef woman. Nana walked over to Cessilia.

"I'm sorry, I tried knocking twice already but I thought you didn't hear, these doors are so huge! So, my uncle said the dinner is almost ready, but

he wanted to know if you prefer to eat in your room or in the tower with us since the weather is nice tonight! Oh, you should drink this later! It's warm milk with honey, it will help you sleep! I'll put it on your bedside table! Oh, you didn't unpack yet? Do you need help with that? Oh, I can... Lady Cessilia, are you okay? You look like you cried!"

Cessilia quickly tried to wipe the tears from her cheeks. Her face felt all dry and salty from being exposed to the sea spray all this time, and her hair was a mess too...

"Nana, c-can I wash my face b-before dinner?"

"Of course! The bathroom should be ready, right? Oh, you should ask them to get you coconut butter! It does wonders for dry skin, all my sisters and I use it!"

"Th-thank you, I'll b-be quick."

Cessilia ran to the suite's bathroom, trying to hide her face from Nana, a bit shy. Upon glancing at the mirror, she realized it wasn't so bad. She took a deep breath and washed her face in the little basin first, hoping the cold water would wash it all away, and wake her up a bit better.

The memory of what had happened just minutes ago was still burning on her lips. Cessilia stared at her reflection in the mirror, trying to see what he had seen in her... A liar? A traitor? She shook her head, chasing all those thoughts away. It didn't matter much now. She knew there was still something between them... She could hold on to that, and it was enough for her. He hadn't kicked her out of his Kingdom, and he hadn't rejected her kiss either. The look in his eyes... Cessilia touched her lips, trying to grasp that feeling again. It was still so vivid in her mind, yet disappearing already.

"Oh, can I help you brush your hair?"

Nana's voice coming from the doorstep made her jump.

"Sorry..." mumbled Nana, realizing she had scared her. "I just thought you might need uh... some help. The coconut butter is great for dry lips too!"

Cessilia smiled, thankful for Nana's bright personality right now. If it had been Tessa there instead, her cousin would have surely insisted to know what had happened for the longest time. Naptunie didn't seem to mind, and she was nice enough to pretend she hadn't seen Cessilia's crying. Although she obviously knew, she was being kind and was just trying to cheer her up. After Cessilia nodded, she merrily walked over to grab a comb and help her with her hair, which was too long for Cessilia to handle alone.

"Your hair is so pretty..." smiled Nana. "Do you have servants at home to brush it?"

"My little sister d-does it."

"Oh right! You mentioned you have siblings! Do you have many sisters?"

"Just t-two, but we have five b-brothers."

"Oh... Five boys, that must be tough! In my family, we always have more girls than boys! ...Do you miss your family? Or your home country? Is that why you were crying...?"

Cessilia chuckled. It seemed Nana was curious after all.

"It's t-too soon," she shook her head. "I j-just arrived t-today, b-but I am alright. Th-thank you, Nana."

"Oh, you're welcome! You know, when my uncle said you were a princess, I was very nervous to accompany you! I mean, I have never been friends with a real princess before, and the rich girls I know are all so haughty and mean... like that Yekara girl. I don't get why they always make fun of my tribe the most. Without us, who would fish for all our citizens?! I don't care, you know, we learn to ignore them. I hope she won't become the Queen though. We really don't need a bad person like that!"

"Why d-did you enter the c-competition, Nana?"

"Oh... I'm not really sure. I mean, my uncle suggested it, but I wasn't really motivated. I don't know much about the King, and the little I do

know is scary! I think he hoped the King would be a bit nicer if he had a nice queen... You would make a very nice queen, Cessilia! Will you seriously take part in the competition?"

"...Yes," muttered Cessilia, her heart picking up a fast rhythm again.

"That's good!"

"Nana, what is the c-competition like?"

"Oh, not much! They call it a competition, but it's just having all the candidates over in the castle, and there are three ceremonies where they can showcase their talents. It can be anything! Then, the King just decides on his Queen, and that's pretty much it. I know the Council can give their opinion, but they don't decide. Although, I'm worried it might get a bit nasty..."

"N-nasty? How?"

"Well, candidates can't give up, but they might be forced to; if they are heavily injured, if they commit a crime, or if they are proven to not be virgins. I think those are the rules, and there are already rumors that some candidates won't play very fairly... Ah, not me! I just heard it from the people in the kitchens. I don't think it will get too bad, though. If they attack other candidates, they'd be committing a crime too, which would disqualify them. Maybe it's just me being too cautious!"

Cessilia didn't feel like Nana was exaggerating, though. From what she had seen earlier, at least a couple of her competitors would be very fierce in the race to the throne... It would be better if everyone was like Naptunie, but she highly doubted it.

"The first ceremonial banquet will be in two days, so don't worry, we will have plenty of time to prepare! We can still order you a dress by then, and we can go do more shopping tomorrow and the day after too! Oh, can I look at your dresses later? I mean, I don't want to be too, uh, curious, you know, but I'm really, really curious about what you brought from the Dragon Empire! Is it true that everyone wears gold there? And only the Empress can wear purple? I have tons of questions already!"

Cessilia smiled. Of course, she did... For now, though, she had to get ready to go have dinner with the Counselor, and Tessa should be coming home soon too...

Just as she thought so, the doors to the suite were opened with a bang, and Tessa walked in, visibly furious.

“T-Tessa?” asked Cessilia, worried.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” grumbled her cousin, diving onto the large bed without even taking off her clothes.

She buried her face in the pillows and stopped moving. On the other side, Krai stared at the young woman on the bed, then directed its red eyes at Cessilia, letting out a short growl. Cessilia sighed. Their love lives were not going to go as smoothly as they had hoped...