

The White King's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 5

#5 The Nine Lords

"...Are you planning to destroy them already, uncle?" Chuckled a feminine voice.

Tessa was back, carrying a large tray with tea and dried fruits. She put it down on the table, but her confident attitude suddenly disappeared as she met with her uncle's eyes. Yassim was still trying to grasp the dynamics of that family, but it was clear the young woman was also cautious in her uncle's presence. She nodded slightly.

"I'm going with Cessi," she said before he asked anything. "I won't let anything happen to her."

Cessilia stared at her cousin with a surprised expression, but Tessa was withholding her uncle's stare without fail. The cousin's dark eyes were suddenly shining with determination, as if she was making a very serious promise... What was this about? Once again, Yassim felt like there was more meaning to her words than what he could witness. Was this related to the Princess' speech impairment? There definitely was something about her, and the way her family members reacted to her, treating her very preciously...

The War God didn't answer, instead, turning back to Cessilia.

"Just the two of you?" He frowned.

"And K-Krai," smiled his daughter. "It will b-be fine."

The War God let out a long sigh, caressing her hair once more. He was visibly unwilling to part with his daughter, which was understandable. Who would have sent his daughter and niece by themselves abroad, in a country they knew almost nothing of? The fact that he was sending her with his dragon spoke volumes.

The truth was, Yassim was a bit curious as to why Cessilia didn't seem to have a dragon herself... Or by her side. From what he had seen, dragons could be away from their masters for prolonged periods of time, but it still seemed odd that she wouldn't bring hers, if she had one, with them to the Eastern Kingdom. Or was this as a precaution, perhaps? The old man didn't dare ask, for he feared they would have misunderstood it as him trying to invite a dragon owner, rather than a princess. Plus, the War God's Dragon would be coming along. How dare he ask for one more!

"...Stay here tonight", suddenly said the War God. "You can leave tomorrow morning."

Cessilia glanced in Yassim's way, and he realized she was asking for his opinion. He immediately nodded.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Your Highness!”

The War God slightly squinted his eyes, with no intention to answer.

“Take all you need,” he added.

“Oh, can I take some weapons from the armory, uncle?” Exclaimed Tessa, suddenly very excited.

He nodded, and the young woman squealed, running out of the room to wherever the armory was. Cessilia chuckled.

“I will ask auntie Nebora for s-some food,” she said. “And warmer c-clothes.”

She turned to Yassim.

“It is c-colder there, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my Lady. But not as cold as these lands. Because our Kingdom is crossed by many rivers, the weather is more humid, and the temperatures do not change as drastically.”

“Take as much as you need,” said the War God. “Gold, too.”

Yassim couldn’t help but feel a bit hopeful as he heard this.

The Dragon Empire was much, much richer than their broken Kingdom, he had witnessed this fact many times over. Their money was the same, but because gold was withheld in the chests of the wealthy back in the Kingdom, it wasn’t circulating as much, and their primary currency was silver, which was getting rarer as well... meanwhile, here, the noble and wealthy wore gold as if it was nothing. Not only that, but they sold and bought luxury items such as gems, jewelry or fabrics as a perfectly fine way of trading too, while in their Eastern Kingdom, defiance had brought their people to only rely on the silver change to buy only the most needed goods... Yassim had gotten used to it after several days of crossing the Empire, but the Princess wore on herself already much more gold than he had witnessed in several years in the Eastern Kingdom. Even the middle and lower class here were already much wealthier than most of the Eastern Kingdom’s people, who lived day to day with little to no resources. There was no common measure between their two nations’ wealth. In fact, he had even been surprised how sparsely decorated this castle was, considering it was a Prince’s house, and one of the wealthiest men in the Empire, at that... If Princess Cessilia and her cousin brought a bit of gold, it would be a dim light of hope in the Eastern Kingdom if they were to spend it...

“I will,” nodded Cessilia. “I can have c-clothes made if I need, t-too... D-don’t worry. I will t-take all I need, or b-buy it over there...”

The War God nodded, visibly satisfied with those answers. Just then, Tessa came back, carrying two long and sharp swords with an ecstatic smile. However, Cessilia frowned.

“T-Tessa... Those are D-Darsan’s...”

“I know!” Replied her cousin, excited. “And he won’t know for a while that I took them! He’s never let me take them, so this is his loss for being punished! Oh, those are amazing!”

“Is this r-really fine, D-dad...?” Muttered Cessilia.

The War God shrugged, visibly not caring much over his niece borrowing his son’s weapons. Instead, he turned to Nebora as the servant walked back into the room with a large fur coat in her arms.

“They will need more,” he said.

“I know, my Lord,” replied the woman. “We’re already gathering all they need for the journey and putting it with Krai. Cessi, I prepared some of your clothes too, but feel free to take anything you want. And take some money! Oh, and jewelry, too. You should look your best if you’re going there as our representative... A princess can’t look too shabby!”

Yassim almost choked himself. Shabby? The Princess’ cousin alone was already wearing more than enough to impress the whole Eastern Kingdom’s court! Some of the nobles’ ears would bleed if they heard this exchange... He didn’t dare say anything though, and watched as Tessa took a seat by the fire, her fingers lovingly sliding on the swords’ blades. Cessilia walked to pour the tea, just like her mother had done earlier, and her father sat down, closing his eyes and resting in the large seat.

“Y-your Highness...” muttered Yassim, gathering his courage. “M-may I ask how come you’re... residing here? Instead of at the Imperial Palace...”

The War God didn’t even open his eyes or manifest in any way that he had heard the question. For a second, Yassim worried he had overstepped, but to his surprise, Princess Cessilia answered instead.

“Father hates c-crowds... He d-doesn’t want to live in the Imperial P-Palace with our aunt... Mom g-goes more often.”

“When will she come back?” Suddenly asked the War God, opening his eyes to the mention of his wife.

Cessilia and Tessa exchanged a glance.

“I d-don’t know...”

The Prince grimaced, and closed his eyes again, visibly unhappy with that answer. Yassim glanced towards the two young women, but neither of them looked surprised. Cessilia offered him some dried fruits, and the old man gladly took it, a bit hungry indeed.

“Is there anything else we c-could need?” She asked.

“I don’t believe so, my Lady. The Kingdom will provide you with everything you need upon your arrival... His majesty will have a room for you in the Castle.”

“A room?” Repeated Tessa. “Is she going as a future wife or a guest?”

Yassim almost bit his tongue, realizing his mistake, but before he could think of something to say, Cessilia shook her head.

“I haven’t d-decided yet, T-Tessa... Getting a r-room for ourselves is b-better.”

The young cousin, staring at Yassim with a suspicious expression, was about to ask something else, but her eyes met with her uncle’s, and she didn’t dare to.

“That’s right,” nodded Nebora. “You should see and take your time to examine the situation first. What wedding now... Tessa told me everything, Old Man. How dare he summon Cessi like that! Is your King a good man? Because we are not going to marry away one of our precious girls to some pighead!”

“P-p-pighead?” Repeated Yassim, shocked. “My Lady, I can assure you, King Ashen is not a... pighead.”

There were a lot of other ways to describe his King, and although he certainly had some concerning strength of character, to go as far as to call a monarch a pighead was too much! Moreover, coming from the mouth of a servant...! Yassim was expecting the Empire to look down on their neighbour a little, but this was just too much!

“He’d better,” scoffed Nebora. “Otherwise, you can be assured he won’t last long. That girl’s brothers will happily come and take her back home if needed.”

“Auntie Nebbie...” Muttered Cessilia.

“She’s right, you know,” chuckled Tessa. “As soon as Kassian and Darsan hear of this, you can expect them to come and make a major fuss there... Hence why we shouldn’t stay here too long. I mean, evading the little ones is easy, but wait until those two hear Cessi is in the Eastern Kingdom, it will be a show!”

Yassim was getting worried all over again. He had mistakenly thought the War God would be the biggest issue, not the older princes! He couldn’t help but think about Dran, the yellow dragon outside. What if his master got mad at them for taking his sister? Plus

another one, the older brother at that? Two dragons would come to wreck havoc in the Eastern Kingdom! Not only the War God Dragon, but two more! What had he done? Wouldn't the Kingdom be over like this!

"M-my Lady," he gasped. "Your brothers wouldn't really... attack the Kingdom, would they? We have nothing to defend ourselves against dragons!"

"D-don't worry," said Cessilia. "They are not unreasonable..."

"...unless it comes to Cessi," muttered Tessa, sending a chill down poor Yassim's old back.

"We won't tell them yet," said Nebora. "Kassian is still in the North, and that idiot Darsan will still be stuck for a few more weeks to take care of that mountain. You have at least a few weeks until they come here and realize you're gone. Moreover, they won't dare to make a ruckus in another Kingdom. The Empress would skin them alive."

Yassim couldn't think straight anymore. Every member of the Imperial Family sounded way too dangerous! Yassim had thought things would be quickly over once he brought the princess, and he'd get to know fast enough if he was to lose his head or not, but now, it was clear even if that didn't happen right away, the Princes would come sooner or later to punish his bravery!

The old man sighed without thinking, while Cessilia handed him a cup of hot tea.

"Are you alright, s-sir Yassim?" She asked him.

"I am, my Lady. I am just worried I have sold my poor head for taking your Highness away from her family!"

"D-don't worry," she smiled. "My b-brothers are not b-bad."

It was heartwarming to see such a gentle young woman speak lovingly of her brothers, while he worried the young princes would destroy an entire Kingdom for her sake. Still, Yassim knew there wasn't much that could be done now. He could only hope this reckless plan of his would turn out for the better...

After this, it was clear they were to dine in this same room, with Nebora bringing little plates of food for them to eat. The meal served here may have been simple in their eyes, but to Yassim, it was truly a feast! There was a gigantic piece of meat, dried meat, many types of fruits and vegetables, several dishes he didn't even identify, cheese and desserts. He was glad to eat, but it was hard to swallow anything in the War God's presence. Although he said nothing much, the man would sometimes take some meat to eat, and go back to resting.

Cessilia had moved to sit on a cushion against her father's legs, her arms and head resting on his lap. He was caressing her long brown curls from time to time, using his other hand to eat.

Both young women had many questions for Yassim, and kept asking him about the Eastern Kingdom relentlessly. It was obvious Cessilia knew more than he had thought already. The young woman had read dozens of books, some about lands even further away than theirs, and she was mostly asking to differentiate tales from reality, while Tessa had heard from folks more than books, as the little they knew about the Kingdom was brought by the few goods and people who did travel the border.

It was strange to think that the border had been open for many, many years, yet only a handful of people dared to cross it each year. There were good reasons for it, though. On one side, people of the Eastern Kingdom were scared of the Dragon Empire, with its strange customs, their dragons and, more importantly, higher costs. On the other side, the Dragon Empire citizens had no reason to cross over; the Kingdom was much too poor, didn't have goods worth trading that couldn't be found in the Empire, and the years of tyranny or civil war had convinced them it wasn't worth the journey. Yassim himself had been baffled how much of an easy journey it was, but how hard it had been for him once inside. The prices were too high for him to buy much more food than he had brought, and his savings were quickly depleted when he had no choice but to use them. Hence, he was more than grateful for each free meal he was given, like tonight.

"...So, most of the system already changed anyway, didn't it?" Sighed Tessa. "The rich people got overthrown and robbed, and what was true a few years ago changed when your new King came to power, then."

"Yes, Lady Tessa. King Ashen got rid of his Father's policies right away, and chased or killed all of the former supporters of King Ashtoran. He only kept people who swore allegiance by his side, including this humble servant."

"Good spring cleaning," scoffed the young woman, biting in a piece of juicy meat.

"As of today, there are only Nine Lords allowed in the court, and His Majesty's people. Those nine lords are the richest, most educated people of our Kingdom, and those our people trust. Each one of them either took a stand against the former King, or pleaded allegiance to King Ashen once he took over the throne. They have lands, people and money behind them, but they are all also highly educated and respected. I believe they are the equivalent of your Empire's Scholars."

"Our Empire has seventy scholars," retorted Tessa. "And they aren't that rich, either. ...And our aunt barely listens to any of them."

"...Do they t-trust the K-King also?" Asked Cessilia.

Yassim smiled. This young lady was smart indeed...

“On the surface, they are his loyal servants, my Lady. However, each one of those Lords hopes to secure their position, and King Ashen is known to be quite... difficult, in choosing his allies. He doesn't trust any of them, to be honest with my Lady. Yet, he needs them to content the people, and prevent further fighting. Not only that, but my King also needs all nine Lords to get along, which is... quite difficult, at times.”

“Nine rich people in a room to learn to share? Yeah, good luck with that,” scoffed Tessa.

“Not just nine, my Lady,” sighed Yassim. “Each Lord represents his family, and at times, their wives, siblings or children can hold as much power as they do. We talk of nine lords, but for some of them, they hold a small clan behind them. Yet, those nine are... most likely essential to maintain a balance. They all hold a strong power in one or more domains our Kingdom needs to be strong with. Military, trade, finance, education, farming, science... Those people will help our young King shape the future of the Kingdom, or we are bound to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.”

“How about you? Aren't you a lord?”

“I'm nowhere near any of those people, Lady Tessa. I am merely an old, wise man his Kingdom was nice enough to keep by his side...”

Yassim felt very sad, pronouncing his words. Indeed, he had been lucky to stay alive until now, given his history, but... His King wouldn't be so benevolent upon his return. It didn't matter whether he got to keep his head or not, though. As long as he could bring the Princess to him, even his death would be worth it.

“Alright, Yassim the Wise,” Yawned Tessa. “Well, I hope you're as good of a guide as you are as a story-teller, then. Because now I am quite excited to visit that Kingdom of yours!”

“Let's go t-to sleep,” agreed Cessilia, glancing towards her Father. “We should leave early t-tomorrow...”

The War God nodded, looking a bit tired, and he got up from his seat, gently offering his large hand to help her up.

“...I'll send you off at dawn.”