

The White King's Favorite

Chapter 6-10

Chapter 6

"T-Tessa?" she gently called out. "I b-brought you some d-dinner..."

A muffled grumble answered from under the covers. Cessilia sighed, leaving the plate on the little table. Her cousin had

moved from above the covers to under it, so she couldn't tell if she had even washed her face or anything... She moved to the

bathroom after grabbing her nightgown from their still-packed belongings. The dinner with Counselor Yamino and Nana had

been pleasant, and they were both unbelievably chatty, so Cessilia only had to nod, and squeeze in an answer from time to time.

She was still a bit shaken up about the earlier events and worried about her cousin too.

Tessa was rarely this down... Krai was

gone, probably to visit more of the Eastern Kingdom by night.

The suite was even more beautiful at night, Cessilia thought. The moonlight was shimmering on the quiet sea and giving

the white nacre of the room a beautiful halo. The Cerulean Suite had now drifted to dark shades of blue and white, with the

waves' gentle sounds as a background lullaby. Once she was clean, changed, and her hair undone, Cessilia slowly moved to the

bed, combing her long locks a bit more. Her cousin's figure could only be seen as a big bump in the sheets, not even a hair

sticking out. Cessilia put the comb on the bedside table, and sat on the other side of the bed, patting the bump. She knew Tessa

wasn't asleep yet.

"D-do you still not want t-to t-talk about it?" she asked softly.

An unintelligible mumble answered her, probably a negative answer. Cessilia sighed, and slipped under the covers to

join her, the room definitely a bit chillier by night. She moved until she could feel Tessa's body under the covers, and grabbed

her hand. She smiled.

"It's like when we were k-kids."

She held her cousin's hand for a few minutes longer, in silence, staring at the ceiling. It was the first time she slept in a

place that didn't belong to her family... but the room was truly beautiful. If this was the most beautiful room in the castle, she

wondered what the others were like.

"...I wish we could go back," suddenly muttered a voice from under the covers.

Cessilia turned her head toward the covers, where she knew her cousin to be. After a few more seconds, Tessa wiggled

her body until her head finally popped out. She hadn't cried, but she still looked pretty sullen, and her hair was an absolute

mess.

"Everything was so simple when we were kids," she sighed. "We could run everywhere in the palace, see each other all the time, make the aunties laugh, and hide at Grandma's when they were mad at us..."

"I miss G-Grandma too," nodded Cessilia.

"She'd always take our side," chuckled Tessa. "The only woman scarier than Auntie Shareen... or my mom."

"I miss my b-brothers and sisters a b-bit already," muttered Cessilia.

"Yeah, I miss my pest of a little sister too. I guess it's because it's our first time so far from home..."

Tessa let out a long sigh, and rolled onto her side, holding her head with her hand and staring at her cousin with a complex expression on.

"Cessi... Are you sure we came here for a good reason? A really good one?"

Cessilia sighed, her eyes on the ceiling again. The hundreds of little polished pieces of seashell were glowing like

large stars in the sky... Deeply thinking about her cousin's question, she thought about everything they had seen today. It was

true they were far from home, in a place which, for the first time, wouldn't care about who their parents were, where no one

would protect them. They had a dragon, but... in those corridors, Krai wouldn't be of any help.

Yet, when her thoughts drifted to her short interaction with the King from earlier, Cessilia's heartbeat accelerated a bit.

She remembered that kiss, like a gentle warmth on her lips, and that look in his eyes.

Without thinking, she began smiling and

pinching her lips, almost as if she could taste it again... Next to her, Tessa grunted and dove face-first into the pillows again.

"Don't make that face," she grunted. "I'm not happy at all right now."

"D-did something happen with Nana's b-brother?"

"No, nothing happened, that's the problem. The first man our age I don't want to fight in a while, and all he's thinking

about is his weapons, his job as a guard, his duty... Every guy but him was staring at me! I don't understand guys. He said he wants a homemaker!"

Cessilia grimaced, feeling a bit sorry for Tessa. She was anything but a homemaker... In fact, despite her beauty,

Tessandra had been born with the personality of a tomboy, probably shaped a lot by her mother's short temper. She had always

been eager to train with her cousins, get new weapons, and had a sharp tongue, a trademark for women in their family. She had

never learned anything that would make her a homemaker either. In truth, Cessilia had always imagined Tessa would find

herself a gentle, capable, and understanding man like her father, so she could become a warrior as she had always dreamt of...

“...I th-think it’s fine,” she finally said, still smiling.

“What is? You think I should move on?” frowned Tessa, lifting her eyes from the pillow.

“N-no. Just make him like g-girls like you. If anybody can d-do it, you c-can, T-Tessa.”

For a couple of seconds, her cousin remained speechless, completely taken by surprise by Cessi’s words. Then, she

jumped without warning to hug her, giggling and smiling from ear to ear.

“T-Tessa!” she protested, completely crushed under her cousin’s sudden attack.

“Oh, this is why I love you, Cessi! You’re the best! I love you the most!” squealed Tessa, ignoring her and kissing her

cheek repeatedly until she laughed too.

The two girls kept laughing and fighting playfully for a while under the covers, tickling each other until they were

exhausted and out of breath. When they were done, Cessilia was lying on her back again, staring at the ceiling, but her cousin’s

arm was over her chest, Tessa lying on her flank right next to her. She could feel her cheek on her shoulder, and her heavy

breathing as they were both trying to calm down a little.

“It’s just like when we were kids,” chuckled Tessa. “Do you remember? Our moms would always find us sleeping in

the same bed, stuck to each other... My mom used to say we should have been born as twins.”

Cessilia nodded, a smile stuck on her face too. Of course, she remembered, because they were so close in age, it felt

like she and Tessa had been together their whole lives. The times they had to spend apart had always been hard, and she

remembered counting the days until she could see her cousin again... Tessa’s family lived in the Capital, where they had their

business, while Cessilia’s lived in the north, in the isolated Onyx Castle. She had never been so bold as to go alone to the

Capital, like her younger sister who frequently escaped.

“Cessi?”

“Mhm?”

“...Can you read something?”

The question had been asked almost with fear in her voice, and Cessilia’s smile gradually lessened. She knew Tessa

didn’t really need a bedtime story; what she really wanted was to hear her voice, Cessi’s voice, without any trembling and

stuttering in it. Cessilia’s heart pinched a little bit. She knew her cousin meant well, just like the rest of her family. However,

she just didn’t feel like it right then.

“We should tr-try t-to sleep,” she whispered.

She rolled onto her side, to face Tessa, but she closed her eyes. Their faces were so close, the two girls were curled up

toward each other, like two halves of a heart. While Cessilia kept her eyes closed and tried to slow down her breathing, Tessa

kept looking at her, with mixed feelings in her heart.

After a few minutes, she slowly extended her hand and caressed Cessi's hair, very gently. They had the exact same hair color, and they had many other similar features. Many people often thought them to be sisters, even twins at times. Their characters were so different, like fire and water, yet they had grown so close as if they were completing each other. She couldn't remember them arguing or fighting, even once, mostly due to Cessilia's gentle nature.

"...Don't worry," she whispered after a while. "I'm sure she will come back."

Cessilia's lips twitched a little, and she frowned faintly, as if she was trying not to open her eyes. She wasn't doing a good job of pretending to sleep, but they both knew that. Tessa kept caressing her hair, gently, and let out a faint sigh.

"And even if she doesn't, I'll be there. I'll be your dragon, Cessi."

Cessilia opened her teary eyes, muttering a silent thank you to her cousin. Tessa smiled, moving her hand to grab

Cessilia's. The cousins spent a moment, simply gazing at each other while holding hands before slowly closing their eyes.

The next morning, they were both woken up by a gentle knock on the door, and Nupia's voice claiming she had brought

them breakfast. The two girls sat up in bed. Cessilia's curls were all over the place, and she had to push them out of her face to

see Tessa's grimace, her cousin glaring at the door.

"I really don't like those three," she grumbled.

Cessilia didn't answer, only stretching for a few seconds before letting the triplets enter. She felt a bit sore from

walking around all day and was a bit jealous of her cousin who seemed fine, only a bit grumpy as usual.

The triplets worked quietly and efficiently. In fact, since Tessa had exposed them, they weren't even trying to hide their

stealth abilities anymore and compared to before, they were a bit faster and more silent.

They were obviously very well

trained despite their young age... if they were even as young as they looked.

"I have to say, I could get used to this," sighed Tessa, staring at the magnificent view beyond the balcony.

Indeed, the room was amazing. It had been beautiful the previous day at dusk, but now, they could see it in the early

morning. The sun was rising from the other side, so they weren't blinded, but they could see the amazing shy pastel shades in

the sky, just above the sea line. The sea felt much quieter too, and Cessilia realized she had slept so well thanks to the regular,

gentle sounds of the waves far below.

The triplets were setting their breakfast on a little table and pulled up a pair of white wicker chairs with little cushions

for them to sit on. Tessa immediately took her seat, grabbing some pastry she could recognize from what Nana had introduced

them to the previous day, while Cessilia grabbed some tea first.

"I still don't like this King," said Tessa, her mouth half-full, "but I have to admit, he's got good taste. Why in the world

is he giving you this room, Cessi?"

Her cousin simply smiled behind her cup, but she didn't answer. She thought so too.

Tessa was used to Cessilia's mysteries, and not one to push her either. She sighed, and just grabbed some fruit. They

really had plenty of choices; the triplets had gone out of their way that morning. In fact, it was obvious they had already

memorized what the girls had enjoyed the most from their outing the previous day, making sure they had those available there.

For a little while, the two of them simply ate quietly, not exchanging a word and just enjoying the morning sea breeze.

Cessilia had put her feet on the edge of her chair, her toes curled up while she quietly drank her tea. As someone who had

grown up with many siblings and about as many dragons around, she appreciated quiet mornings like these a lot, but she missed

her little brothers' and sisters' faces showing up to wake her...

"There he is," suddenly chuckled Tessa.

She was the first to notice the large silhouette flying their way, and Cessilia put down her teacup to go and greet it.

Krai loudly landed below them, digging its claws into the rocks just like before. The large dragon looked to be in a

good mood when she went to pet it, a large fish fin still stuck between its fangs until Cessilia pulled it out.

"Someone's enjoying his new diet," chuckled Tessa.

"J-judging from th-the size of th-that fin, he p-probably hunted it far from here," nodded Cessilia. "Good b-boy, Krai."

The Black Dragon growled in satisfaction as Cessilia continued to pet it. After a while, though, she went back to wash

her hands and resume her breakfast while Tessa took over, playfully throwing Krai little chunks of meat and watching the

dragon open its large maw to catch it. It wasn't much of a challenge, though; with the limited space, Krai only had to move its

head a little to grab them.

"What are you g-going to d-do about Nana's b-brother?" asked Cessilia.

Tessa sighed.

"You know I'm not one to give up. I don't care if he doesn't like strong, warrior women. I just need him to like me...

and I have other weapons to show," she added with a little wink.

"Th-that's my T-Tessa," smiled Cessilia.

"Right? Ugh, yesterday was so frustrating... He said women who wield swords are not feminine! I'll show him if I can't

be feminine with a sword! I think he just felt embarrassed in front of his friends... or colleagues, whatever. I'll show them,

Cessi. I can show all those cads what women are made of!"

Cessilia nodded enthusiastically, happy to see Tessa fired up again. Just then, someone knocked on the door, and one of the triplets opened it to Nana, who barged in with a big basket in her hands.

“Girls! My cousin delivered all these beignets for you, as a thank-you for buying my uncle’s biggest catch yesterday!”

“Oh gosh, I know they are good, but seriously, I don’t think Krai will be able to carry us back if we keep eating those every day...” whispered Tessa.

“M-maybe Sabael likes fuller g-girls,” chuckled Cessilia.

Tessa paused for a second, and when Nana put the basket down in front of them, she put on a large smile and grabbed one in each hand.

“Thanks, Nana,” she said.

Next to her, Cessilia was trying hard not to laugh, but she grabbed a beignet too and threw another one to Krai, who was also a big fan of Nana’s family’s recipe.

“Good morning, Sir Dragon!” exclaimed Nana, waving at Krai, visibly very comfortable with the Black Dragon already. “Is it alright if he eats beignets too?”

“Nana, we were not kidding when we said he can eat humans. Dragons can eat pretty much anything. Trust me, the only thing he risks with your beignets is a serious butter addiction.”

“...He won’t eat me, right?” asked Nana, grimacing a bit.

“Just throw it!”

Cessilia chuckled, seeing Nana awkwardly throw some of her delicious beignets at the happy dragon. Indeed, there might be a real need for the north village to start selling beignets when the dragon returned...

“Do you want to go downtown again today?” asked Nana. “I thought about it, we probably won’t have any risks of bad encounters like yesterday, most of the candidates are entering the castle today!”

“...I want t-to explore the c-castle t-today,” said Cessilia.

Nana’s smile disappeared, and she now looked a bit worried instead.

“Are you sure? I mean, I would be happy to show you around, but there will definitely be some candidates we might run into... I don’t mean to say they are all bad! But, uh... some might not be very friendly.”

“That’s fine,” scoffed Tessa. “I’ll just bring my swords.”

“T-Tessa, no swords.”

Her cousin turned to her, lowering her hand that was about to reach for another beignet. “Seriously? Cessi, there won’t be any shop owners this time. If that bitch talks to us like that again, I want something to slice her damn tongue with!”

“I hope it won’t get that bad...” muttered Nana.

“It will b-be fine,” chuckled Cessilia. “There’s no need t-to scare th-them.”

“...Oh, do you think our beignet-addicted dragon is too subtle?” scoffed Tessa.
“D-don’t t-take your swords,” insisted Cessi. “D-didn’t Auntie t-teach us we c-can win fights without a b-blade?”

“...I guess we’re not talking about the auntie who brings a new sword every day to morning court?”

Cessilia chuckled, grabbing her cup again and putting her feet back on her chair.

“D-didn’t you say it t-too, earlier? We have m-more weapons t-to show.”

After finishing their breakfast, Cessilia and Tessa began getting dressed, and for some reason, it felt like the green-eyed

Princess was picking a prettier dress than the previous day, but her cousin didn’t ask about it. Meanwhile, Nana happily dove

through their belongings, with their permission.

“What is this?” she asked, pulling out one of their coats. “That white fur is so pretty!”

“Snow leopard fur,” said Tessa. “Only Cessi’s family can hunt them, they are one of the most dangerous animals in our

Empire, after the dragons, of course. We’ve got tons of coats like this one, you can take one if you’d like.”

“Oh my god, you have snow? Real snow? I’ve never seen snow!”

“We will t-take you t-to see it someday if you want,” smiled Cessilia, busy combing her hair.

They had both refused to let the triplets help them get dressed, so they were just helping each other instead. In fact, even

back home, they rarely had servants to help them out. Cessilia’s little sister or her mother were the only ones to comb her long

hair, and she didn’t like anyone to dress her, either.

“I’m a little bit jealous,” admitted Nana, caressing the white fur. “I’ve very rarely been outside of the Inner Capital!

Everyone says it’s too dangerous out there. Some of my uncles and cousins do travel to sell our merchandise in the nearby

cities, but there are so many horror stories about merchants getting attacked, it’s very complicated. They have to travel in big

groups, hire some people to protect them and everything...”

“It can’t be that bad,” frowned Tessa. “What about your King? Didn’t things get better after he took the throne? At least

that’s what old Yassim said.”

“Oh, it’s definitely better!” exclaimed Nana, nodding frantically. “In fact, when I was young, even the Capital was

dangerous to live in, but now, the King has chased and still chases all criminals out. I just hope he’ll be able to do it for the

other cities too...”

“Everything seemed p-pretty q-quiet,” said Cessilia. “When we c-came here, we d-didn’t see many cities at all...”

“We only have a few big cities here and there, but our population has decreased a lot because of all the wars, so some

cities are mostly abandoned now... It wasn’t safe, either, so a lot of people left to build small villages and try to cultivate the

soil, hoping it would be safer. It did bring back a bit of the commerce we needed, but... some villages are still raided or have to pay up to be safe from bandits, so it's hard even out there."

"You know a lot for someone who never goes out."

"My uncle is the one who teaches me a lot," nodded Nana. "I'm not very smart, but I really hope to learn more about our agriculture, and perhaps I'll be able to come up with new ideas to help our citizens out there! My dream is to become the first woman counselor!"

"You mean there is no woman at all advising the King?" exclaimed Tessa, surprised.

"Uh, no... Except for his mistress..."

Cessilia's hands froze hearing those words.

His mistress... She wished she had forgotten about that woman. Cessilia put aside her comb and finished getting ready, standing up and turning to the other girls, who hadn't noticed her reaction.

"You should see our palace," scoffed Tessa. "The Empress has almost exclusively women advisors, including our aunt and Cessi's mom. The only man she really listens to is that old Evin who has been there forever!"

"That's funny," noted Nana. "Maybe I'll go work for the Dragon Empire if I can't succeed here!"

"We'll put in a good word," chuckled Tessa with a wink.

"Let's g-go," said Cessilia, smiling too.

The three girls left the Cerulean Suite to follow Nana, acting once again as the guide. Although, while walking through the castle's corridors, she was careful to whisper. The corridors were sometimes a bit

narrow so they had to walk behind each other rather than abreast, but Cessilia didn't care. Actually, she was still in awe at

how different this castle was from her father's or any of those she knew at home.

Perhaps because it was in fact the only castle

of their Kingdom, it was particularly beautiful. A lot of thought had been put into the decorations, including the magnificent

blown glass of the many windows, the colored candles, and even the beautiful seashells seemingly trapped in the walls in some parts.

"It's one of the most popular styles around here," explained Nana excitedly when asked about it. "According to the

legends, this castle and all of the island we are on now were once under the sea, but the Sea God slowly took back the waves to give our people more land to live on."

"So all th-this stone is not b-built, but c-carved?" asked Cessilia.

"We aren't sure! Some think our ancestors built it to honor the Sea God, but many think the Sea God himself had this as

just one, big rock, and we simply carved rooms and buildings into it. It's a big mystery, and if you ask any stonemason, you'd

better be ready for a long debate! Now it has become a real style a lot of people use for their houses; that's why we love collecting seashells and we use them for all sorts of things!"

Cessilia was fascinated with how Nana's people had turned the natural craft into a real work of art. The little bit they

had seen upon their arrival couldn't reflect the real architecture. There weren't two rooms alike, and a lot of the stairs

appeared randomly, without any form of symmetry, spiraling up and down, sometimes to lead them directly into another room,

sometimes opening up to another corridor. In fact, this castle was a maze for anyone coming here for the first time. Without

Nana and the triplets, Cessilia was afraid she might get lost during her stay here. She had a good sense of direction and could

probably go back to her suite after a couple of trials, but it would take her days to remember every room here. A lot of them

didn't actually have doors, either. Except for the bedrooms, it seemed like each room was very open, with arches instead of

doors, and sometimes, even windows opening into another room rather than outdoors.

"There isn't much room for privacy anywhere," noted Tessa as they were looking down on a little open garden below

them.

"Oh, the rooms are fine," said Nana, "but I think it was the previous King's will to make sure there wouldn't be too

many, uh... places for private meetings. Only the Counselors and the King are granted offices."

"Afraid of schemes?"

"...Probably. There were many political conflicts, so the King was more worried about his allies turning against him

than external attacks... My uncle says many rooms are actually still completely locked because the King alone has the keys to

those, so half the castle is locked, while the public spaces must be available to everyone."

"That's one odd concept, but our aunt did a similar thing when she became Empress.

Kicked everyone out and aired the

rooms! Our palace is much bigger though, it's supposed to welcome hundreds of people easily... She allocated a lot of space to

the scholars and such..."

As she was speaking, Tessa noted Cessilia's dark expression. Her cousin was still at one of the windows, staring down

at something she visibly didn't enjoy much. Curious, Tessa joined her to quietly take a peek, Nana taking a glance at the next

window too.

Due to the uneven structure of the castle, the windows often gave views of the lower floors, including some of its

private gardens and patios. One of those was more like a promenade on what was the lowest floor of the castle, right above the

sea. A little pathway of white stones had been arranged on some grass, and beautiful wood arches were spread out on that path, the green ivy growing on it adding some shade to the walkers. Further along that path, the arches were replaced by a natural rock arch, as the promenade turned into a corridor, and back into the castle.

“Oh, that’s the Sea Stones Corridor!” said Nana enthusiastically. “It’s so beautiful once you get inside, I’ll take you there next if you want!”

“Thanks, Nana, but it seems to be occupied by some annoying leeches at the moment...”

A bit confused, Nana frowned and looked down again to figure out what Tessa was talking about with such an annoyed tone. It took her a few seconds and a lot of squinting to see them.

It wasn’t because the three women were especially far, but because they were mostly hidden by the many plants

covering the arches. In fact, without them moving and their colorful dresses, she might not have been able to see them at all.

The three young ladies seemed to be slowly strolling down the promenade, and from the glimpses she could catch between the leaves, they were enjoying each other’s company. As she recognized each of them one by one, Nana grimaced more and more.

“Oh...”

“You did say we might run into some competitors,” groaned Tessa. “Who are the other two?”

“Lady Vena of the Pangoja Clan, and Lady Ashra of the Yekara Clan...”

“The same clan as that vixen from yesterday?”

“Yes, it’s her cousin...”

“Great... I forgot there would be two of them.”

Cessilia wasn’t saying a word, but her expression wasn’t good. Her green eyes were set on the trio below, and as she

glanced down, Tessa noticed her cousin’s fingers tightly gripping her dress. This probably was because of the third woman, the

one Nana didn’t need to mention. Her bright red hair was shining like a jewel among the trees, so much so that she was the first

one the eye would see.

The King’s mistress, Jisel..

“...What are those three doing together?” muttered Tessa.

“I think some might want to get close to the King’s mistress...?” muttered Nana. “I’m not sure, but since she won’t

become Queen anyway, they might have chosen to befriend her to get close to His Majesty... Both Lady Vena and Lady Ashra

are very smart, and they are considered the prettiest in their families too. Their chances are probably good...”

“But?” asked Tessa, raising an eyebrow.

“I wouldn’t trust them,” grimaced Nana. “Out of all the candidates, those two are the ones I wouldn’t trust the most.”

They can be quite vicious... I heard Lady Ashra treats her servants very badly.” Tessa sighed faintly and glanced toward her cousin again. Regardless of the other two women, Cessilia was obviously bothered by Jisel the most. Her eyes were following the red hair between the leaves with a complex expression, as if she was upset.

“Nana...” she finally said. “We still have t-time t-to p-prepare b-before the c-competition, right? B-before the first bbanquet.”

Her stutter was suddenly a bit worse, which worried Tessandra, but she was apparently the only one to take notice.

Nana nodded.

“Yes! About two days, but it’s more than enough to place an order for a dress at the shop, and–”

“I’m not g-going to p-place an order,” said Cessi. “I want t-to g-go in my own c-clothes.”

“Oh, uh, alright... I mean, you probably have the prettiest dresses already anyway! So, I think you won’t need jewelry

either... we only need to think about what you’ll do at the banquet?”

Cessilia slowly nodded, but her eyes were still stuck on her rivals below. Tessa glanced down again, only to realize

they were also being scrutinized. Between the leaves, Jisel had raised her eyes, meeting the Princess’ gaze. For a few seconds,

both women stared at each other, with very different reactions. Jisel was smiling and obviously trying to act coy, while

Cessilia seemed upset as if she was staring at something deeply unpleasant.

After a moment, Jisel returned her attention back to the two women with her, and they resumed walking, slowly

disappearing under the rock. Nana cleared her throat awkwardly.

“We can always visit it later. It’s much prettier at dusk anyway...”

“I already hate the idea of women putting up a charade to please a man, but to think you have to go against those

vipers...” grumbled Tessa. “Nana, you seem to know the candidates. Anyone else we need to watch out for?”

“Not so much! I’m only friends with Nanaye, the girl from the Yonchaa Tribe, she comes here often too, but all the

others, I only know them from reputation. I think the most serious candidates are the two girls from the Yekara Clan, those from

the Pangoja Clan, and Lady Bastat from the Sehsan Tribe... Lady Axelane is often said to be the most beautiful girl in the

Kingdom too, but I’ve never seen her myself. The Nahaf Family treats her like some precious treasure so she rarely goes out...”

“Great,” scoffed Tessa. “They all sound adorable... What a pain in the butt. At least, aside from that Jisel and the two

Yekara vixens, they should be easy to deal with. How about a barbecue for the banquet, Cessi? Let’s put them all in a circle

and call out Krai...”

“You’re not supposed to harm the other candidates...” mumbled Nana, a bit uneasy.

"Oh, I forgot about that... Not that I care much, though. Anyway, Nana, any suggestions?"

"I don't know... I have an idea for myself, but I have no idea what the other women will do... Most will probably dance, sing, or play an instrument, I think. It's a competition to find the best Queen, but the main goal is just to have His Majesty fall in love with them or just become the favorite, I guess..."

Tessandra's eyes went back to her cousin, but Cessilia's expression had gone back to being neutral. In fact, as she stepped away from the window, her eyes looked a bit lost, and a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"...Cessi?"

"I know what I will d-do," she announced, visibly happier.

"Really?"

Cessilia nodded, and her smile made Tessa smile too. Although that Jisel woman was clearly a thorn in her cousin's heart, she knew Cessi wouldn't be so easily defeated. She hadn't decided to come here all on her own, for her first time abroad, just to give up.

"Alright, the barbecue will have to wait. Come on, Nana, there's probably more of this castle to see, and if we can avoid more annoying people on the way, that would be great."

"They are allowed anywhere!" protested Nana. "It's not like I can avoid the places they would go, I have no idea..."

While Tessa kept teasing her, the three women kept walking, seeing more of the incredible place. Yet, Cessilia's heart wasn't there this time. She was already focused on the upcoming banquet, and what she would do to get to the King's heart. She knew the odds would be against her, the foreigner with little to no power here...

"Lady Cessilia! Lady Te-... Tessa!"

The shouts came from behind, and the girls turned around, spotting the poor Counselor Yamino running in their direction. The old man was having a hard time carrying himself at the speed he wanted, all sweaty in his toga and out of breath.

"Uncle!" exclaimed Nana, running to him.

"Why are you ladies so... hard to find?!" he mumbled, out of breath.

"We were t-touring the c-castle," said Cessilia, walking up to him too. "What is g-going on?"

"It's poor Yassim!" blurted out the old man. "His Majesty had him locked in the dungeons this morning!"

"What?! Why?"

"I'm not sure, but His Majesty was very upset with him for bringing the Princess. I had thought he had changed his mind, but this happened this morning! I came to find you to let you know, but... I don't think there's anything to be done, sadly."

“He can’t leave Counselor Yassim there!” exclaimed Nana, panicked. “It’s such a scary place...”

“At least he’s not condemned to death,” Yamino shook his head. “I think he intends to leave him there until the end of the competition...”

“He’ll only release him if Cessi wins?” grimaced Tessa. “I’m not fond of the old man after he lied to us, but it’s not worth sending him to a freaking dungeon...”

“I’ll t-talk to the K-King.”

They all turned their eyes to Cessilia, who was standing there, calm and resolute. Nana went completely white.

“No, no, no, Lady Cessilia, that’s not a good idea at all. Especially if His Majesty is mad...”

“Where c-can I find him?”

“Who? The King? Lady Cessilia, no!” protested Yamino. “I came to let you know, not to have you killed or locked away too!”

“Nupia, t-take me t-to His Majesty,” ordered Cessilia, ignoring them.

After a hesitation, the servant bowed and turned away to guide her. Nana and her uncle were both still shocked.

“No...” Nana blurted, visibly panicked. “She’s going to get herself killed! Lady Tessa, I’m not kidding!”

“Don’t worry, Cessi isn’t kidding either,” chuckled Tessa. “Trust me, she’ll be fine. You might as well try to stop a dragon...”

Chapter 7

Nupia led Cessilia through the castle, the others following behind her in silence. As they approached the King’s

apartments, things became strangely silent. Not just in their group, but the atmosphere in that area of the castle was noticeably

different. It seemed as if all the people working or living there were deliberately avoiding those corridors and, thus,

abnormally quiet. It was also one of the highest floors, and as it became more of a large tower, the windows were showing

both the sea and the archipelago, and the rest of the Kingdom on the other side.

Finally, they arrived in front of a single door. There were no guards and absolutely no sign that a king was sleeping

behind that door... It felt almost as if they had been taken to some dungeon instead.

Cessilia glanced at Nupia, but the servant’s

expression was completely neutral. Still, it was surprising that she had taken Cessilia there without hesitation. It felt as if she

had received orders beforehand... In fact, she turned around, addressing the others before Cessilia could walk in.

“Only the Princess is allowed to see His Highness.”

“Says who?” groaned Tessa, glaring back.

“His Majesty.”

“T-Tessa, it’s alright.”

Tessandra still wasn’t fond of the idea, and stared at Cessilia, even more confused. She had known her cousin would be unstoppable once she had decided to go and see the King herself, but she hadn’t expected she would not be able to accompany her. She hesitated for a while, conflicted between the trust she had in Cessi, and how much she didn’t trust that capricious King at all.

“...Are you sure?”

Cessilia gave her a little nod, but the faint and confident smile on her cousin’s lips was what put Tessa at ease. She didn’t need to know everything. Although she was curious to know why they had come here and what Cessilia wasn’t telling her, she knew her cousin wasn’t acting unreasonably. She trusted Cessilia, even if her cousin didn’t trust her enough to share her secret, it was fine. She had resolved long ago that their bond would go far beyond that of the blood they shared. They were best friends, but they were still each entitled to their own secrets.

While Cessilia walked in alone, Nupia stepping aside, Tessandra sighed and leaned against the opposite wall, crossing her arms with a sullen look. Despite her position, she was ready to barge into that room anytime. Nana looked even more nervous next to her, fidgeting with her skirt and pacing in front of the door.

“Will she be alright...?” she mumbled. “His Majesty can be very scary...”

“I don’t think he would harm the Princess,” said Yamino, although he didn’t seem very convinced himself.

“Aren’t you worried?” Nana asked Tessa. “Do you know why Lady Cessilia was so confident earlier? I don’t understand...”

“I don’t understand either, but Cessi isn’t reckless. You saw it, she probably has something going on with the King that lets her go in there, and not us.”

“And you really don’t know? ...Aren’t you curious at all?!” exclaimed Nana.

“Trust me, when you grow up in a powerful family like Cessi’s, you learn that it’s best not to ask too many questions...”

Defeated, Nana could only give up and wait. She stopped pacing, and instead, kept her eyes riveted on the door, her hands joined as if she was praying...

Meanwhile, inside the room, Cessilia had stepped in without a sound. The door closed behind her, a bit too loudly.

This place was bigger than she had thought, but it was still pretty bare and dark. There were only two windows on each side.

In fact, it didn’t seem like a place to live in at all, more of an office.

A large table was in the middle of the room, dozens of papers spread on it. As she walked closer, Cessilia realized

most were maps. They were complex, but not for an Imperial Princess. She could easily decipher the military language and various little crosses and dots on it. It was a very simple version of the Kingdom's map, cleared up to show the Royal Army's lines of attacks, and the places still belonging to the enemy, mostly mercenaries, if she aligned this with Naptunie's previous explanation. Just as she had said, the King was still deeply involved with "cleaning" those areas of the robbers and criminals controlling them...

"I told you to let me rest."

The deep, grumpy voice came from the opposite side of the room. Cessilia heard the bed creaking before he sat up.

Even in the darkness, his white hair was glowing like a halo around him, as it was capturing every bit of light possible. The

King sat up, his large hand rubbing his face, still unaware of who had come to see him.

He was obviously asleep just a second

ago and trying to move his stiff muscles around. Then, his eyes slowly rose from behind that hand, and he finally saw her.

A few seconds of heavy silence ensued, and Ashen stood up. Cessilia was tall, but the King was even taller. Anyone

else standing there would have been naturally intimidated by his height and large build, but not the Princess. Fearlessly,

Cessilia withstood his glare.

"Free C-Counselor Yassim," she said.

"So that's why you're here?" he scoffed. "This isn't your business, Cessilia. Leave."

"You c-can't k-keep him locked away. T-tell them to free him."

"This is my Kingdom!" he suddenly roared. "I don't take orders from you!"

His voice resonated in the room, loud as a storm, but Cessilia didn't flinch. She didn't avert her eyes, and instead, her

green irises only went colder, like a wave of silent anger growing. However, the

infuriated King wasn't impressed either. He

stepped forward out of the shadows and faced her from the other side of the table. Just like before, he was half-naked, his

scarred chest going up and down with his heavy breathing.

"I decide who gets imprisoned or not," he continued. "Did you think I'd obey you right away like a good boy? You

thought wrong. I am the King and I am the only one who decides what happens to my subjects."

"What d-did you imprison C-Counselor Yassim for? B-because he b-brought me here?" she retorted, not backing down.

"That is none of your business, I said."

"D-didn't you imprison the C-Counselor b-because of me? Why d-don't you arrest me t-too, then?"

"Watch it, Cessilia," he tilted his head. "Don't push it. This isn't your family's Empire, this is my land, my Kingdom.

...Do you even know how many people already protested about your presence?"

“You’re th-the one who allowed me t-to stay, d-didn’t you?” she retorted. The King silently clenched his fists. His actions had been contradictory from the start, and they both knew it. Cessilia was right, but it only made him even madder that the Princess could hold on to his weakness for her like this. She wasn’t afraid of him, and she was even disturbingly calm while confronting him. He would have rather had her fear him, hate him.

“Enough,” he said, averting his eyes from her.

“Ashen.”

He got goosebumps from hearing his name, from her lips. Again. He was about to glance her way but resisted. He

didn’t want to see those large, green eyes and what they could do to him.

“I said enough. Go away.”

“No. Free C-Counselor Yassim.”

“I said I won’t!” he roared. “Why are you so obsessed with that old man? Why do you care what happens to him?! He’s my counselor, I will do what I want with him, and you have no say in my decisions! This isn’t your father’s castle, it’s mine!”

He realized he had said too much one second too late. He stepped back, pissed with himself.

“Is th-this about my d-dad? ...D-do you still resent my f-father?”

“Resent him? Cessilia, do you even realize what he did to me? ...Your father threw me away. He sent me back to my

Kingdom, knowing exactly what I risked by coming back here. He refused to help me!

Do you remember how young I was? Do

you have any idea what I suffered to come back here, to take my throne back? It could have been all over if he had just helped me!”

“...He d-did help you,” muttered Cessilia.

This time, she was the one averting his furious gaze, her green eyes looking down. Her hands were trembling, and it

was getting a bit harder to breathe. The golden choker felt too tight around her throat.

She stepped back without realizing it, not

in fear, but because she was uncomfortable. Ashen’s anger was too hard to watch.

“Helped me?” scoffed Ashen’s ice-cold voice. “Your father barely took pity on me. He did what he had to do not to be

a monster, and then he threw me back into this horrid war, without looking back. Do you know what he told me that night?

Never to come back into the Empire again. He didn’t care what was going to happen to me, he couldn’t bother with me

anymore. He took pity on me as if I was a street dog, and sent me back to hell again.

You think your father helped me? He gave

me hope, the hope that I was finally going to have a real man I could count on.

Someone who would really help me, help my

Kingdom. But no. He just took that hope, and then he wrecked it all!”

“D-didn’t you succeed, th-though? You b-became the K-King, Ashen. J-just like you wanted...”

The King slowly shook his head, smirking in disbelief. He took another step forward, his legs almost hitting the table.

He wasn’t trying to get closer to her; his hands moved to show the many, many scars on his body.

“Look at these, Cessilia. This is what your father did to me. For each day, each minute, and each second I spent fighting to take my Kingdom back, I got one of these. ...How long do you think it would have taken to end all of this if your father had really helped me? How many of these would I have had if Krai had been with me like he is now with you? Isn’t life easier when you have a dragon to do your bidding? Every time I saw death, I thought about how your father had thrown me out, back into this hellish place again, back into the hands of all of those who wanted me dead. ...And now you want me to be grateful too?”

“My p-parents saved your life,” Cessilia retorted. “They tr-treated you like one of—”

“They treated me like they treat everyone else, Cessilia. Your mom healed me like she had healed dozens of people before me, and hundreds after!”

“D-don’t you d-dare insult my mother,” Cessilia hissed, getting angry this time. “She saved your life!”

She had shouted that last sentence, without a stutter this time. Anger was keeping her from flinching again, and the mere thought of Ashen insulting her mother made her clench her fists and tremble. She could understand his pain, and how hard it was for him, but she couldn’t stand how he was pushing this onto her parents, twisting the narrative.

However, he seemed to realize he had gone too far. He closed his mouth in a sullen expression, slowly shaking his head. For a few seconds, a heavy silence came between them, neither willing to keep this argument going. They didn’t really want to fight each other, but there were just too many feelings bottled up on both sides. Ashen’s anger was so visible, in his shoulders going up and down with his breathing, his tight jaw, and the way he tried not to look her way.

Cessilia took another step back. If it wasn’t for the Counselor, she probably would have already walked away.

“...I don’t resent you,” he suddenly said. “You were young, this wasn’t the life for you. But now, if you... Perhaps, we can start things over. That is my hope, Cessilia. I... I didn’t forget you.”

This time, he didn’t look angry anymore, but instead, he was staring right at her, his eyes filled with hope and expectation. He didn’t expect that this time, the Princess would be the one giving him a cold look.

“What of th-that woman, th-then?”

Those words hit him like a knife in his chest. There was no need to even name her, he knew instantly who Cessilia was talking about. He had even almost forgotten about her, until now.

“That’s... She has nothing to do with you.”

“D-didn’t you c-choose her b-because she looks like m-me?”

Ashen glared back at her, but Cessilia was already angrier than that, her green, accusative eyes on him. Her stutter was worsened by rage, but it was nothing compared to how she was feeling inside. In fact, the mere thought of Jisel was enough to make her blood boil. She hated that woman like a dragon hates whoever covets what’s theirs. She had always seen how her father’s dragon was possessive of her mother, and now, Cessilia felt just the same. Her feelings for Ashen had remained unwavering, even after all this time, yet now, their second meeting was tainted, soiled by that woman’s presence.

And she resented him for that.

“D-did you really tr-try t-to re-... rep-place me?” she stuttered with great difficulty.

“Well, you weren’t there, were you?” he coldly answered. “...You had made your decision, and I had to move on,

Cessilia. I don’t blame you for siding with your father, you were indeed young. Perhaps it was all for the better, but... it doesn’t mean it’s easy for me to face you now. Nothing was easy for me here. Nothing. Jisel is just... She’s different from you, it just

happened. I never expected to see you again. We weren’t supposed to see each other again, right? So... Can you just... stop

doing that? Don’t try to cry and play the victim, I can’t stand any more of this.”

She didn’t look like a victim, though. When he dared to glance up, the Princess was staring at him with the anger of a

woman who was betrayed, but not weak, nor fearful. Her green eyes were as piercing and dangerous as a dragon’s eyes when

they were staring at what had once been the subject of her affection. Her first real love.

“...Is th-that all you th-think of me?” she muttered bitterly.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Th-that you c-could replace me!”

Just as she finished her sentence, Ashen violently threw away everything that was on the table. Everything went flying:

papers, quills, and bottles of ink crashed on the floor and the wall in a loud ruckus. The wooden table had a very visible crack in its center too.

“Replace you? You’re the one who fucking left me, it’s your family who kicked me out!

They could have saved me, but

they sent me back to the war I had barely survived! And now, you come here and think it’s all going to be easy? This isn’t your

Princess life anymore, this isn’t your Dragon Empire!”

“Ashen,” she muttered, tears in her eyes. “You d-don’t kn-kn-know...”

Her stutter was getting worse. Her whole throat felt too tight, so much so that she could barely breathe. Cessilia recognized the familiar and yet fearsome sensation. That tingling in her head, the cold and numbness in her fingers. She tried to fight it, to give a voice to her feelings, but she was trapped. Trapped in her own body, and Ashen couldn't see. His glare was on the damaged table, his fists still clenched hard against his body, he refused to look up.

"Enough," he said. "Get out. I won't free Yassim; if you don't like it, you're free to leave."
"You c-c—"

"Stop doing that damn thing with your voice!" he suddenly roared, unable to bear it anymore. "I don't want to hear that, speak normally!"

His sudden burst of anger cooled Cessilia like ice. Her breathing was still heavy, and painful, but she stopped fighting it. When he calmed down a bit, Ashen realized his mistake. The anger in her eyes, and her cold stare. For a second, he saw a mix of her mother's calm and her father's murderous glare in those green eyes, and he was brutally sent back, seven years in the past. A wave of emotions and memories hit him violently, as if everything that he had locked away was just broken open by Cessilia.

"I... No, I..."

However, he knew it was too late. The calm in Cessilia's eyes was even more frightening than the anger just seconds before. A cold expression was painted on her face, and he suddenly realized she was going to do exactly what he wanted. She wouldn't talk anymore.

It was as if Ashen's sudden burst of anger toward her stutter had flipped a switch in Cessilia. From her complete panic, she had gone into her own self-defense mode, putting up an emotional shield, a barrier between him and her. The heart that she had dared to expose for a second was once again put back into that chest and locked away. She was closing up on him, and he could see it happen right then and there. It was almost scary to watch that emotionless gaze of hers on him.

Ashen tried with a faint movement to extend his hand, but there was still that table between them.

"Cessilia, I..."

She remained completely mute. Those lips wouldn't even open, although he could see her painful breathing, the way her chest heaved erratically. Her face was a bit paler than usual too, and her long curls were somewhat disheveled. Despite her fierce silence, she looked vulnerable right now, so vulnerable he wanted to do something, but like a wounded animal, she

wouldn't let him in. Perhaps she would bite, even. Her green eyes had gone stone cold. He just didn't know how to undo what he had done. Minutes ago, he would have given everything to have her leave, but now, he wanted to repair this. This Cessilia wasn't the girl he had known, and he didn't know who she was. She was too different from the sweet girl with green eyes he had once fallen for... Why and how was she able to act like this? "I didn't..."

He tried to step forward, realizing one second too late the table was still blocking his way. When he thought about making his way around it, he saw Cessilia take one step back, and another. She was still staring at him, with that emotionless gaze that made him regret everything. Slowly, the Princess retreated toward the door, backing away as if she refused to show her back to him. Her cold eyes wouldn't let him go. He considered moving around the table to grab her, take her hand, and hold her back, but he wasn't so foolish. Before he could even decide, Cessilia loudly opened the door wide, and, giving him one last furious glance, she disappeared on the other side. A heavy, icy, and dark silence fell after she had left. Ashen stumbled back onto his seat, completely numbed by what had just happened. He put his face in his hands, and let out a long grunt of frustration. He really hadn't foreseen her coming back at all...

On the other side, Cessilia had closed the door behind her just as violently as she had opened it, despite its heavy weight. Once she was out, she leaned her back against the door, her furious gaze going down to the floor.

"...Cessi? Are you alright?"

She lifted her eyes to see Tessa and Nana, both looking worried for her. Her first reflex was to smile faintly, but it fell short. As if she had been able to hold it back all this time, her shortness of breath suddenly came back, making her whiff and pant unevenly. It was as if all of the symptoms that she had been trying to ignore so far were coming back at once to hit her. Cessilia felt dizzy, and white dots appeared in her field of vision before she fell down on her knees, unable to stand.

"Cessi! What happened? Breathe, girl, breathe..."

Cessilia kept nodding and held on tightly to her cousin's shoulder. She knew she could control this if she just calmed down, but calming down was hard when she couldn't get enough air and oxygen. She put her hand on her chest, trying to force herself to calm down, and ignore the numbness in her limbs.

"She's suffocating," said Nana. "Perhaps we should get that choker off..."

She reached out her hand, but before she did, Tessa slapped her hand. Nana cried out in pain and surprise, retracting

her hand right away, shocked.

“Don’t touch that thing.”

There was something so imperious and serious in Tessandra’s voice, the young woman didn’t even dare complain, and nodded helplessly.

“Nana, where’s the nearest window? She just needs to breathe fresh air.”

“Oh... Th-this way!”

Happy to have something she could help with, Nana jumped on her feet and led them to the closest window she could

find, a large one at that. As soon as they were close, the two cousins rushed there, and Cessilia leaned forward, her eyes

closed, trying to take a deep breath. Next to her, Tessa was whispering gentle words to help her calm down, rubbing her back

and pushing her long curls out of the way. It lasted for a while, and Naptunie could only stand to the side, a bit jealous of the

two young women’s bond. If anyone else had seen them, they would have thought they were sisters, even if their appearances

were a bit different. Tessa’s dark eyes and shoulder-length hair made her look a bit more intimidating, while Cessilia had the

grace of a delicate princess. Both of them were beautiful in their own way, but next to them, Nana felt like an unrefined little

girl... She bit her lower lip and walked away to get some water for Cessilia, a bit ashamed of her own thoughts.

“Th-thank you,” Cessilia finally mumbled after a while, slowly taking deep breaths.

“What happened?” frowned Tessa. “He upset you? I thought I heard some shouting, but the door was so thick, and that

annoying servant wouldn’t let us in...”

“It’s f-fine,” her cousin shook her head. “It just d-didn’t g-go like I wanted...”

“His Majesty refused to free Counselor Yassim?” asked Nana, bringing back the cup of water. “My uncle went to see if

it could be negotiated with the guards, but...”

Cessilia took the cup of water with a faint smile and leaned against the window, almost calmed down by now. Naptunie

was a bit worried for the Princess. She was paler than usual, and her eyes seemed very sad too. For a few seconds, Cessilia

simply drank the fresh water in silence, as if each drop helped her regain her composure. After a while, though, all traces of

panic and sadness had disappeared from her face; she stood back up, brushing her curls back.

“We will f-free Yassim th-the Wise,” she declared.

“What? But the King—”

“Alright,” said Tessa, a bright smile on her face as well. “I was a bit upset after all that crap and those vixens from

earlier, but I guess this will be a lot more interesting. Nana, do you know where they put him?”

“My uncle mentioned the dungeons, downstairs but—”

“The dungeons it is, then. Who doesn’t like a good jailbreak?”

“But...!”

It was no use; Tessandra was already walking down the nearest flight of stairs, excited as if they were going to do some

fun activity. However, she was going to the dungeons! Naptunie turned to Cessilia, worried, but the Princess looked just as

serene as her cousin. She even put a gentle hand on Nana’s shoulder.

“D-don’t worry, we will free the C-Counselor.”

Naptunie was in shock. The Princess didn’t receive permission, so she was going to free the Counselor herself! There

were a million reasons she could think of as to why this would be a very bad idea right now, but Cessilia looked so confident,

Naptunie didn’t even dare name one. The Princess turned to Nupia, giving her the empty cup of water.

“D-Don’t you t-try and st-stop us,” she coldly told the servant.

“I won’t, Princess.”

Cessilia gave another cold stare to the young servant but didn’t add anything, and instead, she followed her cousin’s

path, taking Naptunie with her. Nana was still completely at a loss. One part of her enjoyed the two young women’s company

and boldness, but sometimes, she wondered if it was really alright for her to be involved in all of this. She was no princess and

she had no dragon... What if the King took his anger out on her or her family instead?

What if the Princess was then accused of

treason, and war with the Empire was triggered? Naptunie was conflicted internally, and she couldn’t help but let Cessilia

know as they reached the lower floors of the castle. She had been holding her hand all this time, feeling like a younger sister

following her elder sister, borrowing some of Cessilia and Tessa’s dazzling confidence.

“D-don’t worry,” said Cessilia with a gentle expression. “We will p-protect you t-too.

You’re our p-precious friend.”

“You really think I am your friend?” Naptunie exclaimed, surprised. “But... I only just met you yesterday!”

“You’d be surprised,” said Tessa. “We don’t have many friends outside of our family. In fact, I can count them on one

hand. But you’re a nice girl, and you welcomed us even though we are foreigners, which I can’t say has been the case for many

people here. Plus, Krai likes you, and dragons are pretty good at guessing people’s real nature.”

“Oh... Thank you,” mumbled a blushing Nana.

Those words were the nicest thing she had heard in a while. She had many friends, but none she was very close with.

Most of the time, she found people couldn’t stand her endless chatter, or understand her endless love for all kinds of books...

Although she felt comforted, Naptunie was still worried to follow the two girls into the lower depths of the castle. They

had now reached an area without any windows or views of the outside. Only candelights were lighting their paths, and no one was there, either. She guided them a bit reluctantly, wondering if things would go as smoothly as the two cousins made it seem.

Luckily, they quickly spotted Counselor Yamino's large figure, as he was loudly arguing with one of the guards.

"I'm telling you, this can't be happening! Counselor Yassim left on a private matter this morning! He has been by our King's side for all those years, and he wasn't arrested when he came back with Princess Cessilia of the Dragon Empire! His Majesty agreed to leave him!"

"His Majesty may have agreed to let Sir Hemelion live, Counselor Yamino, but my Captain takes orders from His Majesty himself, and our King definitely ordered us to lock him away for treason!"

"You mindless monkey! Don't you have any common sense? Counselor Yassim saved half this Kingdom by saving our King's life years ago! Do you seriously think our King will..."

Before he could end his sentence, Yamino saw Tessa walk past him and into the dungeons' corridors, followed by Cessilia and Naptunie. It happened so quickly, both the Counselor and the guard were speechless at those women that simply ignored them and walked past the checkpoint.

"Wha-... Hey, hey! Miss! You can't go in there, it's restricted access! No one can enter the dungeons without permission!"

"You should be more worried about who comes out rather than who comes in," retorted Tessa with a smirk. "Although, it is definitely going to be a problem for you later... Damn, this place is a maze! Hey, Guard. Where is the old man?"

"We are I-looking for C-Counselor Yassim th-the Wise," said Cessilia, as if they were just coming to visit a friend.

The guard was dumbfounded at the nerve of those women... This was a dungeon, not one of their drinking patios! This place was specifically designed underground and far away from the castle's living and entertaining spaces so people like them couldn't possibly land here by mistake. Yet here those three girls were!

"No, no, no," he protested. "You should not be here. All four of you get out before I call the guards."

"Oh, you're so welcome to," chuckled Tessa, taking out her twin swords. "I'd love to unwind with some physical exercise!"

"You fool!" retorted Yamino. "This is Princess Cessilia of the Dragon Empire and Lady Tessa, a mighty warrior as well! See if you little soldiers dare to stop two daughters of the Dragon Empire!"

"The D-Dragon Empire?" muttered the man.

He clearly had made the link to the two pretty young women who had just forced entry into the dungeons. His eyes went to them, and to Tessa's swords, before he mumbled something about checking with his superior, and ran. Tessa chuckled.

"Thank you, Uncle Yamino. A mighty warrior, me?"

"I pulled what I could," sighed Nana's uncle. "If it can buy us some time..."

For a while, they ran down the corridors of the dungeons, looking for Yassim. The layout was rather simple, but

Cessilia was astonished at how dark and crowded this place was. Dozens of people were in those cells, many glaring at their little group as they walked by. She could tell most of those men did belong here, but some were in a worrying state, skinny and unhealthy... From time to time, they would run into a completely empty cell, though, which made her even more worried...

"There he is!" exclaimed Nana, spotting him first. "Uncle Yassim, are you alright?"

The old man looked a bit sick, but even more surprised to see the little group that had come to his rescue. He was alone

in a cell, luckily, but it didn't solve the fact that they didn't have anything to free him.

"...Do you think we can try asking the soldiers for the key?" grimaced Nana.

"What key?" scoffed Tessa. "I can just open it..."

She drew out her twin swords and suddenly began attacking the door's lock. The sound of metal hitting each other was

loud for a few seconds, but one could tell that the lock was old and wouldn't hang on for long. Cessilia grimaced.

"You're g-going t-to break my b-brother's swords..."

"No, it should be fine. Just one more hit and then..."

They were both right. On the last hit, the lock gave up, but so did Tessa's sword, breaking in two. The blade fell on the

wrong side, cutting the sword woman's hand. Tessa grimaced.

"Tessa!" exclaimed Nana, shocked to see the blood.

"It's fine, it's fine. It's not deep..."

Indeed, the cut was long and thin, but only a bit of blood came out. Tessa licked it quickly, making her cousin grimace,

but Cessilia ignored her, walking in to help the Counselor out.

"You shouldn't do this for me, my ladies... It's fine, His Majesty is mad at me, I don't want him to deflect his anger at you..."

"Too late for that, Cessi already had words with him," scoffed Tessa. "Come on, let's just go before those idiots really bring people to stop us..."

The soldiers were alerted indeed, but the Princess' presence seemed to leave them all in utter confusion as to what to

do. Not only that, but many of them were glancing at Nupia in their strange group, and when they tried to leave, no one dared to

stand in their way. It was clear they weren't freeing a major criminal, either; everyone knew about the old Counselor. Hence,

they were let out without a word, although no one dared to voice their support or say anything. A lot of them probably wondered if they would be punished for this, but it was too late to do anything to stop two Royal Counselors, a candidate, and a princess...

On their way out and after they had finally reached the ground floor, Nana let out a long sigh.

"I can't believe this went well... Are you alright, Uncle Yassim?"

"I'm grateful for my ladies to have come to save a helpless old man, but I'm afraid this won't help quell the King's anger toward me..."

"I d-don't c-care," declared Cessilia. "I want you t-to b-be my c-counselor if the K-King doesn't want you."

"Really?" exclaimed Yassim, looking a bit amused. "If it's the Princess' order, then..."

"Let's g-go t-to my room, I have q-questions for you," added Cessilia.

"...Are you alright?" Nana asked Tessa, visibly a bit worried.

"I'm fine. See?"

To her surprise, when Tessandra showed her hand, there was no wound anymore, but instead, a thin trail of little, vivid green scales. Naptunie was so shocked she blinked twice.

"Wha..."

"The dragon's skin," Tessandra explained. "It's one of our families' abilities. When our skin is cut like this, scales appear to accelerate the healing process and protect us. It's almost instantaneous, and everything will be better in just a couple of hours!"

"It's so amazing!" exclaimed Naptunie. "And they are such a pretty green too!"

"Right? It means that if I had a dragon, it would have been... Cessi?"

Cessilia, who was walking in front, had brutally stopped. Her eyes were staring ahead, and Tessandra realized the door to their Cerulean Suite was open. She turned her head, but next to her, Nupia seemed at a loss too.

"I... We didn't leave it open..."

Cessilia left the Counselors there and ran into the bedroom first, her cousin right behind her. The two women's reactions were enough to make Naptunie worried too, and she followed behind, wondering what was going on. When she finally walked in and saw the state of the room, she gasped in shock, covering her mouth.

It had been ransacked.

"Oh my God," cried Nana. "Who could have... We were just gone for a while..."

Cessilia and Tessandra were both staring around the room with furious eyes. This had been very plainly targeted

toward them, their clothing and possessions had been completely trashed and spread all across the room. The fur coat Nana

was looking at just that morning was ripped, as were all of their clothes. The furniture had been turned all over the place, the drawers were thrown out, but the curtains and carpets were fine. This was clearly meant to intimidate and upset them.

“...They took our gold,” muttered Tessandra, furious.

The two young women ventured farther into the room, staring at all the damage.

Everything had been done in a hurry,

savagely, and without any restraint. The bags they had brought with them had just been violently ripped apart, the contents

spread all over the place for more damage. Naptunie was so shocked at the scene, she began tearing up silently.

“All your pretty dresses...” she mumbled, “and your money...”

When she took notice of Naptunie’s tears, Cessilia walked back to gently hug her.

“D-don’t worry, Nana. Th-this is nothing.”

“That’s for sure,” scoffed Tessa. “Nothing compared to the payback those wretches will receive...”

“C-Counselor Yamino,” said Cessi, “c-could you and C-Counselor Yassim g-give us a few minutes? We will c-clean

th-this up.”

“What? Clean this? You should report this, my lady!”

“N-no. I d-don’t want t-to g-give them the sa-... sat-tisfaction. We will t-take c-care of it our way.”

“We will clean it up for you, my lady,” said Nupia, stepping forward. “My siblings and I are—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Tessa was holding her sword’s blade pointed at her throat, her dark eyes glaring

at the young servant. Nupia froze, her eyes down on the blade, visibly scared.

Tessandra’s movement had been so quick and

swift; it was as if her weapon had come out of nowhere.

“You and your siblings are not taking another step into this room,” she hissed. “I don’t trust you any more than whoever did this.”

“But—”

“G-get out,” Cessilia ordered.

Her tone was just as calm as her cousin’s and as cold as ice. No matter what, it was clear the two women’s thoughts

were aligned. With a sullen look, Nupia stepped out. Yamino and Yassim were still baffled by the scene and barely moved to

let her out. As soon as the servant was gone and the doors closed behind her, Tessa lowered her sword. Cessilia’s expression

too seemed to relax a little, although her eyes were still down on the disaster at her feet.

She let out a faint sigh but didn’t seem

as perturbed as one could have been by this sabotage. For a few seconds, a strange silence befell the room, and the two

Counselors seemed at a loss whether to go now or not until Cessilia spoke up.

“C-Counselor Yassim, c-can I ask you s-something?”

“Anything, my lady.”

“Why d-did you choose to g-go to the D-Dragon Empire?”

Of all questions, this one seemed particularly out of the blue, but Cessilia’s green eyes as she looked at him were clear.

She wanted an answer, now. They hadn’t seen Yassim since the previous day, but since she had seen Ashen, and gotten a glimpse of his complicated relationship with the King, Cessilia was eager to know. Tessandra frowned.

“Right... You said the King wanted a queen, but he obviously had many options here already. Why did you come specifically to get one of our Empire’s princesses?”

Tessandra could tell there was a special relationship between Cessilia and the King, but just like her cousin, she was suspicious of Yassim’s involvement. It was a long journey for the old man, and he obviously risked his life to bring Cessilia back here to the Eastern Kingdom. They knew he had lied, but that didn’t explain how he had known that choosing Cessilia to come here as a candidate would spare his head from the King’s wrath... and make her a plausible candidate.

The old man, clearly defeated, nodded slowly. He looked tired from his short time in the cell but did his best to stand straight in front of the Princess.

“I once again apologize for my duplicity, Princess Cessilia. In fact, my visit to the Dragon Empire was guided by my own suspicions about King Ashen’s past. ...You see, all of our citizens know the King disappeared, seven years ago.”

“Right before the fall of the previous King,” Nana nodded. “I remember. There were claims he had been killed by his father’s enemies... It made a lot of things worse because many also suspected the Princes were trying to kill each other, and those left were violent and ruthless. We didn’t want them to become King... but Prince Ashen was good to the people, and many were upset about his death.”

“Exactly, Lady Naptunie. However, an old man such as myself knows best about half-truths. I believe all the people in this room will be able to keep this secret, but... our King didn’t exactly die at that time. In fact, he was very close, but miraculously, our master survived his fate long enough to escape those who wanted him dead. I know this for a fact, because I myself helped our King escape this very castle, and Aestara, back then.”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a glance, both surprised.

Yassim had saved Ashen from death? If that was true, it didn’t seem like the King was holding a lot of gratitude toward his savior. From the start, it was clear the King was mad at the Counselor for something, and he had already banished him even before Yassim had brought Cessilia and made his anger worse...

“So... your King didn't really die back then? But he was gone for two years, wasn't he?” asked Tessandra.

“Unfortunately, I wasn't able to save the Prince's life and bring him to safety myself.

Truth be told, I was only able to

help him leave the Capital before our pursuers found me. I was captured, put into a cell just like today, and left there with no

idea what had become of the young Prince. Even when rumors grew of his death, I had no way to confirm it for myself.”

“So you helped him flee, but you didn't see him die. And then...”

Tessandra tilted her head, and in her eyes, it was clear she had understood too. The old Counselor nodded, a faint smile

on his lips.

“You're a very smart lady, Lady Tessa. Seven years later, when our Prince came back, talking about gods who had

trained him, wearing scaled armor, I began to wonder about what had really happened to him, seven years ago. The good and

young boy I had desperately tried to save had returned as an angry seventeen-year-old, a man ready for war and battle, with

unparalleled strength and skills. That led me to wonder if... if the young Ashen had really met gods, the same gods he claimed

had trained him for those two years.”

Tessandra's eyes went to Cessilia. The Princess was perfectly calm and composed, not surprised at all by Yassim's

assumptions. Everything indeed made more sense now.

“Sadly, the more I asked questions, the more upset my King was with me. In fact, I realized that my King was

desperately holding on to that story, but refused to have any of it even discussed. He refused to talk about what had happened to

him after we separated, and threatened to imprison me, torture me, or kill me several times if I kept going on with my

questions, or discussed it with anybody else. Eventually, as my suspicions grew, my master banished me from the Capital... So

I took one last, insane, and insolent bet, and I made the journey to see if my assumptions could possibly be correct.”

He smiled faintly, while looking at Cessilia. Thanks to his meeting with the Princess and her mother, Yassim had been

able to come back and keep his head. In fact, the old man didn't care much about dying. What he wanted, however, was to free

his King from a lie that seemed to torture him in several ways. It wasn't just about knowing the truth behind King Ashen the

White's legend. What Yassim truly wanted was to understand what had happened to the good-hearted, fifteen-year-old boy to

turn him into the tortured, violent, and ruthless King he was today.

Cessilia's presence felt like incredible luck, or perhaps an inevitable twist of fate...

“Th-thank you. ...C-Counselors, we will m-meet you at d-dinner t-time,” she simply said.

This was a polite but decisive way to ask both old men to leave them for a while. Now that they knew why Yassim had made his journey to the Dragon Empire of all places to find Ashen's prospective bride, Cessilia didn't want to discuss this any further. Her cousin still had eyes on her, but Yamino and Yassim didn't discuss it, and both men bowed. They felt a bit reluctant to leave the young women to deal with the mess; however, Cessilia and her cousin had just confronted the King and freed a man without his approval... Surely, it was safe to leave the young women to deal with this much. Hence, the two elders left, although Yassim cast one last glance toward the Princess, gratitude in his eyes. Once the doors closed once again, a faint silence installed itself. Tessandra kept staring at her cousin, but Cessilia didn't say a thing and turned back toward the mess, calm and resolute. Meanwhile, realizing she was the only one who had been crying, Nana quickly tried to wipe her tears, and walked over to start cleaning up the mess. She was in a bit too much of a hurry. After a couple of seconds, she grabbed a dress that had also been tattered, and let out a sharp cry of pain. "Nana!"

Tessandra and Cessilia both ran over, to find their friend's hand bleeding. "I'm sorry," said Nana, starting to cry again. "I didn't see the shards..." It wasn't her fault at all. In fact, Tessa's expression darkened as she discovered the numerous little glass shards spilled all over the fabric. This was no accident, there was nothing in the room that would have matched those pieces of glass before it was broken. Someone had deliberately put those there, with the intention of one of them getting hurt. Cessilia, who was observing Nana's injuries, came to the same conclusion at the same moment, and she frowned as well. She brought Nana away from the mess to rinse her hand quickly and get rid of the smallest shards, but her head turned to the balcony. "K-Krai!"

Her call was in one simple, sharp, and single shout. The dragon's black head appeared behind the rail a second later, a bit wet, and Nana realized that Krai had stayed on the beach nearby since that morning. Tessa, who already knew her cousin's intent, walked over, holding the same dress. Just like Nana, her hand was cut in multiple places, but as previously, her green scales appeared, pushing the little shards out and covering the cuts. Hence, she didn't seem to care at all, and held the dress near the dragon's snout, making it sniff it. "Find th-them," ordered Cessilia. "B-bring them b-back t-to us." The dragon sniffed a bit longer, and then suddenly flew away with a long growl. Tessa sighed, and threw the dress down, annoyed. "Can Sir Dragon find the culprits...?" asked Nana, a bit calmer.

“It might take him a little while, but he will,” nodded Tessa. “A dragon’s sense of smell isn’t particularly great, but their memory is. Krai will never forget something he smelled once. Plus, the culprits might not be too far...”

“It’s probably one of the other candidates,” muttered Nana, still upset.

Cessilia shook her head calmly. She was carefully bandaging Nana’s hand with a little piece of linen fabric that had

been spared, although her wounds weren’t that bad.

“Th-they p-probably p-paid someone to d-do this,” she said.

“I agree,” nodded Tessa. “The noblewomen we saw so far all wore perfume, but I don’t smell any here. Plus, they

probably aren’t so dumb as to risk getting caught and disqualified before the first banquet... This looks like a warning from some petty bitches.”

“This is so mean and... bad!” protested Nana, sullen. “All your money, and your dresses... and the first banquet is in less than two days now! What are we going to do...?”

Next to her, Cessilia began taking off all of the gold jewelry she was wearing which hadn’t been stolen. In fact, she was

wearing a lot of gold, and when Tessandra did the same, everything put together still constituted a small fortune. The only thing

left was Cessilia’s choker, which she apparently had no intention to take off.

“C-can we exchange th-this for m-money, Nana?” asked Cessilia.

“Of course! That should be a lot of money, but... you’ll just trade all of this for a lot of silver. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“We have more where that came from,” chuckled Tessa.

“If our g-gold is what scares th-them,” added Cessilia. “We c-can d-do without t-this.”

Nana nodded, although she still felt bad about trading their gold, as they would definitely be losing in the change. Gold

was so rare and precious in this Kingdom... She had also thought the two young women’s wealth would be one of their

strongest assets in the competition. Yet now, Cessilia seemed to be renouncing all that gold so effortlessly, and Naptunie was a

bit admiring of her. The Princess had probably grown up with different values, but to be able to give up on her money to

stand equal to the other candidates was still something... She took a deep breath.

“It will be fine,” nodded Nana, suddenly resolute. “I’ll get as much silver as I can out of this, and we will buy you the prettiest dress we can!”

“I d-don’t n-need a new dr-dress.”

This time, even Tessa seemed surprised by her statement. They both stared at the Princess, a bit lost. Cessilia was

already gathering the ruined clothes together, careful as to where she grabbed them, and shook them carefully. The many pieces

of glass were clattering to the floor, showing the insane amount hidden in the clothes. From the multiple colors, they had clearly been from broken bottles or vases, as they had seen many of those in the market. In the Dragon Empire, glass wasn't common and most containers were made of clay or metal. Here, though, glass was a common material, and just like their windows, many daily objects were made of blown and tinted glass. With a sigh, Tessandra began doing the same next to her cousin, shaking each piece of ruined fabric to make sure no glass was left, and putting it on the bed, which had been miraculously spared. Naptunie wanted to help, but one of her hands was damaged, and she was afraid she'd spill blood all over. "I'll go get a broom!"

She came back very quickly and since Cessilia had dismissed the servants, she used it herself to carefully assemble all that broken glass together in a little pile. The more she gathered, the more upset she was at how people had done this to injure the Princess.

"They are cheaters," she grumbled as they finished. "Just cowards to do this while you were gone! I hope Sir Dragon finds them and gives them a hard time!"

"He won't eat them," scoffed Tessandra, "but he'll bring them back to us and then we can make them pay... I wish I meant that literally, for once. Looking at this, it looks like they didn't spare anything. Of all the outfits and fabrics we brought, they ruined most of them... or stole the whole thing. What do we do, Cessi?"

Indeed, the end result was a bit disheartening, and Nana almost felt like crying again, looking at all the ruined dresses.

Many had the skirts ripped open, the fabric torn apart, and the little gems broken or smashed out of their spots. It was clear they hadn't just stolen the gold jewelry, but even the precious gems sewed into the dresses and the piece of clothing itself, if they couldn't take it out, probably to disassemble it elsewhere.

Strangely, though, Cessilia's eyes on the pile didn't look upset at all. Much to Naptunie's shock, she even had an enigmatic smile on while staring at all her ruined belongings.

"We have a b-bit of t-time left before the b-banquet," she said. "Let's g-get t-to work."

Chapter 8

The banquet hall had been prepared with the utmost attention. This event was bound to bring a lot of nervousness for everyone present. The long, rectangular room had high walls and large, glass windows, and a magnificent ceiling with a unique mosaic made of a myriad of polished nacre. The chamberlain had picked each curtain, each rug, and each chair cushion so nothing would be out of place, all in dark shades of blue to enlighten the white and light wood furniture. The highlight, though,

came from the dozens of beautiful glass bowls, hanging from the ceiling, on the walls, or decorating the tables, each containing a candle on a little bed of sand. Each was glowing with the color of the glass surrounding it, but there were so many that it felt like the night could fall and the room would remain as bright as during the daytime. In fact, it wasn't late, but it was already quite dark outside. The sun had been covered by dark, heavy clouds that carried a promise of a storm; there would be no sunset viewing that day. Indeed, it was humid and hot inside, and the rain was just beginning to fall against the glass windows. The servants, who were running left and right to bring the first dishes and pour drinks into the guests' cups, were frequently sending worried glances toward the large doors on the side, hoping the wind wouldn't blow them open.

None of the already present guests seemed concerned about the upcoming storm. The sounds of their polite chatters and chuckles were somehow louder than the first rumbles of thunder outside. A lot of those laughs and smiles were forced and fake, though. It was hard to remain joyous and enthusiastic, locked up in a room with a monster.

Sitting alone on his throne, at the end of the room, the King's eyes were sending daggers. Even the ladies who had been waiting off to the side for their chance were a bit too scared to approach. Ashen the White hadn't even bothered to change his usual outfit. In fact, he was half-naked, with a thick, black, fur cape on his shoulders for decoration only. He didn't wear a crown or any jewelry, and even his pants and boots were completely dark and plain. Yet, his imposing figure allowed no mistake as to who was the alpha in the room. He was sitting, but it felt as if he was standing taller than anybody else. He wasn't moving, but his piercing glare was circling the room as if ready to set on its prey and hunt it down. The only human being daring enough to stay by his side was a red-haired woman. She was even sitting on one of the arms of the throne as if it was a stool. While the King leaned on the other one, not glancing in her direction at all, his hand slowly making his wine swirl in his cup. Jisel was the one to regularly pour wine into his cup instead of the frightened servants, and from time to time, she would lean in to whisper something in his ear. He never responded to her, but she didn't seem to mind at all, a faint and confident smile stuck on her red lips.

That woman's red dress was surprisingly simple, compared to that of the other women in the room. Especially the young women, who all looked dazzlingly beautiful. They all wore jewelry of white nacre, silver, or seashells on their dark

skin, and had complex hairstyles, with braids and white pearls, or wild curls let loose. Even more dashing were their gorgeous, long dresses. Despite those having long skirts and sleeves, they subtly exposed their shoulders, collarbone, cleavage, or back, each adapted to the lady's best asset. They all were in cool colors such as purple, blue, green, or darker shades of red. Each dress was prim but close-fitting, tailored to complement the beauty of the lady wearing it. The most extravagant ones included feathers, fur, white pearls, or embroideries for details.

The candidates for the Queen's title were the easiest to spot, each more beautiful than the last, and the center of attention where they stood.

In one corner, Counselors Yamino and Yassim were both equally nervous, their glances going alternately from the King to the entrance door of the hall, where people came and went in regular intervals.

"Our ladies are late..." sighed Yassim behind his cup.

The old man was the main target of the King's glares, and an invisible circle was formed around him that no one would dare approach, except for Counselor Yamino. It was as if he was carrying some deadly disease or a target on his back that no one wanted to block...

"Naptunie did mention she wanted to stay behind and help the Princess and Lady Tessa," muttered Yamino. "I hope this is just them being fashionably late..."

"Or perhaps they have nothing decent to wear," chuckled a high-pitched voice.

Both Counselors turned their heads at the same moment. Just a few steps away from them, a little group of young people was smirking and laughing at the duo. Lady Safia, who had spoken, was wearing a dashing, off-the-shoulder, burgundy dress, her long braids tied in an updo to show her large golden earrings. She was obviously the center of attention of the little group, with four young men having eyes only for her, and the two other ladies looking pretty bland in comparison. Her haughty expression had her chin slightly upwards and her full lips pouting, but it only enhanced her long neck and beautiful lines.

"Lady Safia," said Yassim, bowing. "You seem very aware of the incident. Do you have anything to report?"

"A jailbreak is what should be reported," she retorted. "You have guts to dare show your face after His Majesty had you jailed, old man. Or could it be the Princess' authority takes precedence over our King's? Quick as ever to change your loyalty, I see. You should be careful, Yassim. Traitors don't get to keep their necks long..."

"Thank you for the warning, Lady Safia, but I'll gladly offer my neck for the peace of our Kingdom. This old man is already grateful for all the years I've been given to live and serve my King."

He had subtly ignored her implicit accusations about Princess Cessilia and kept his faint smile on, which annoyed the young woman even more. She glared back at him without adding anything, but her followers were quick to take over.

“Who cares about that Princess,” scoffed one of the girls. “From what I’ve heard, she’s very ordinary, and her skin is so pale, she looks sick. The only thing she has is that gold she brought, and now, it appears it’s been stolen. She really has everything to lose by coming here. I bet she won’t even dare show herself! I’m sure there is no one more beautiful than our Lady Safia.”

However, her flattery was lost on Safia; the haughty young lady already had her eyes elsewhere, and more precisely, on one woman who was already a step ahead in the race to the King’s heart... Jisel. The truth was, that woman was also paleskinned, and she didn’t need much to stand out. Her red hair made her shine like a dangerous flame in the room, and unlike her rivals, her dress was much more revealing and daring. She wasn’t trying to hide her status as the King’s mistress at all, and it worked to piss off her rivals.

“...Let’s not mind the prostitute,” hissed the other girl next to Safia, glaring her way as well.

Safia shrugged her shoulders and walked away. Other than Jisel, another woman could be said to be standing out because of her unique beauty. It was made even more obvious by the number of young men gathered around her, who barely blinked while staring at this dashing dark beauty. She wasn’t very tall, but Lady Axelane, the rumored gem of the Nahaf Family, was living up to her legend in a beautiful, light blue dress. In fact, the color of her dress seemed to have been picked to contrast the exceptional darkness of her skin, so dark it seemed to almost have blue highlights in it. She had purposely chosen only white nacre jewelry and pearls too, as if to make it even more obvious. Her long curls were pulled back to enhance her facial features, feminine and delicate. The lady herself acted as if she were some precious doll, with shy smiles and gracious movements, politely answering the men courting her and ignoring the glares from her rivals.

Although the banquet had officially started, there was some faint tension in the room as they all waited for the real action to begin: the candidates’ performances. However, it would only begin once all of them were present, and for now, two of them were still missing, making the Counselors grow more and more worried as time passed. The storm getting a bit louder outside was like a drum reminding everyone of the tension growing stronger in the room. All the candidates were staring at one

another, silently evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their rivals. They had all invested a lot in their outer appearance, but they knew the real deal was yet to come. For now, they were putting on an act of friendliness and politeness until they could all show their claws...

Then, one of the older servants walked up to the King, bowing politely and muttering something most people didn't get to hear. Ashen answered briefly, and the servant turned around.

"My ladies, my lords, the first banquet will officially begin now! First, His Majesty hopes everyone can have fun and dance, and then get to enjoy the Queen Candidates' talents!"

A little orchestra on the side began playing, and in a perfectly calculated choreography, several young people also stepped forward to dance. Yassim took another deep breath in, glancing at the door once again. Obviously, Lady Cessilia wouldn't know much of the rituals and dances popular in the Kingdom, but it didn't matter much, as long as the Princess could demonstrate other talents... The only real way to fail this first banquet, or first trial, was to not do anything at all, or not show up.

As he thought this, the Counselor suddenly got even more worried.

"...Surely nothing would have happened to Lady Cessilia, would it?" he mumbled.

"By the gods, no! Yassim, relax a little. Those girls have a dragon as their bodyguard. Moreover, Nana told me Lady

Tessa's extraordinary sword skills were enough to protect them. You're getting old, my friend. As if anyone would dare to physically attack the Princess!"

Although Yamino meant well, his words weren't enough to reassure Yassim. The old Counselor glanced the King's

way, and sure enough, Ashen was also staring at the door, without a care for the dances going on in the middle of the room, or the bold young ladies who dared to approach him and try to make conversation. The King's dark eyes were riveted on the door,

an underlying anger directed that way, as if he was considering whether to break it down or not... or perhaps he was also worried about the missing lady? Yassim slowly shook his head. If only the young King could be more honest with himself, and kinder too...

"Your Highness!" exclaimed a young lady, suddenly placing herself among the dancers. Recognizing one of the candidates, most people stepped aside, and the orchestra played a bit quieter too. Most of her rivals made grimaces or stared at her with their eyes scrutinizing her appearance from head to toe.

She had a bright, confident smile on, but that was really all she could distinguish herself with. The young lady was

wearing a gorgeous indigo dress, her long, frizzy curls held back by several silver headbands. Her jewelry was a bit too much, though, an awkward mix between silver and nacre, and there was so much it was hard to focus on her face rather than the obvious display of wealth.

“Lady Vena,” muttered Yamino. “The young lady of the Pangoja Clan is as bold as ever...”

Indeed, the young lady was brimming with confidence. Very subtly, her eyes went from the King to Jisel, and a faint smile was exchanged with the King’s mistress before she went back to him. The redhead tilted her head, a mischievous smile on her lips, and she stepped away from the throne, almost as if to leave the King more freedom for his movements. That exchange made Yassim fear for the young lady...

“May I offer Your Majesty a dance?” asked Vena, extending her hand.

The next seconds were so foreseeable, it made the whole scene even worse to witness. An awkward silence followed

her question, all eyes going to the King. However, Ashen the White wasn’t reacting at all to the young woman’s words, simply

staring somewhat her way, as if she had been some mere ant in his field of vision. He even had his cheek resting against his fist, a sullen look on as if he was dying of boredom. He didn’t move an inch or open his mouth to answer, not even to rebuke

her. She was standing alone in the middle of the hall, terribly alone. Little by little, Vena’s enthusiasm from before visibly

plummeted, and she cleared her throat very awkwardly. Her eyes went to Jisel again, with no smile this time. Only the King’s mistress was smiling from ear to ear, utterly amused.

“Y-Your Majesty,” Vena repeated, “may I have the honor of a dance? I am one of the best dancers of my generation, and I am sure you will enjoy a... a dance with me.”

Her speech wasn’t convincing, and it fell completely flat. She obviously hadn’t prepared anything to convince the King,

and she hadn’t thought she would need to. Yassim sighed, feeling a bit sorry for the poor girl. She had obviously been duped and put into this situation by someone else’s scheme...

A few more seconds of a heavy and embarrassing silence followed, and Vena looked more and more alone on the dance

floor, the audience staring without daring to do anything. Any man could have walked in right then to save her, but who was foolish enough to embarrass themselves with her, and in front of the King too? Even the orchestra didn’t dare play more than half their usual volume, and this atmosphere was getting distressing for everyone.

“Your Majesty...” Vena muttered.

Her hand slowly lowered, and the poor girl looked on the verge of tears, her cheeks red with embarrassment.

However, that's when the King's expression changed. From total boredom and disinterest, his dark eyes suddenly lit up with a vivid spark, and he slowly sat taller. Vena's heart accelerated, and a victorious smile appeared on her face, convinced the King had finally seen something in her that would make him agree to dance with her. She raised her hand again, her shoulders going up and down from her excited breathing. Ashen slowly got off his throne, and she was prepared for him to walk up to her, but something seemed a bit off. She realized his line of sight didn't seem to stop on her but went beyond. As he stood, it became clear he hadn't been looking at her, but at something beyond her shoulder. Not only that, but Jisel's smile was gone too. Vena lowered her hand and looked around. All eyes were turned to something behind her; she had suddenly become completely invisible. During a mere second of confusion, she stepped back, unsure how to react, before she finally turned around. Her embarrassment turned into absolute shame when she noticed the tall figure at the hall's entrance. Cessilia's appearance wasn't simply breathtaking; the Princess looked as if she had stepped out of another world and into this one. She wasn't wearing any nacre, silver, or gold jewelry. Even her hair was simply braided a little to be held behind her ears, and that was it. No, what attracted the eye was her incredible dress. Unlike her rivals, her dress was made of several layers and several shades, from a dark indigo blue to regal green, going through all teal shades. It may have seemed like too much, but each layer began below her belt and was as thin as a veil, all the colors floating and melting on top of each other, like the petals of a unique sea flower softly blown by the wind. The real magic was hidden on the ends of each skirt layer, though. At the border of the pieces of fabric, something shimmered, like miniature stars captured in the edges of her dress. Even more impressive was the top part. It was made of an incredible green fabric, which shimmered like thousands of little emeralds sewed together. She didn't need any jewelry; her dress was made of something much shinier than any other piece of jewelry in the room. She stepped forward, and when she grabbed her dress to bow very slightly toward the King, they all saw her wrists and hands had gone completely dark; they were covered in black scales. Behind her, Tessandra's hands were the same, but instead of bowing to the King, her dark eyes went to Safia, and she muttered, a smirk on her lips. "...Thanks for all that broken glass." A long silence followed the Princess' entrance, but this time, the audience was in awe rather than awkward. Cessilia

easily distinguished herself not only by her impressive dress and lack of jewelry but by the intriguing dark scales visible on her wrists and hands. Those scales were so dark, for a minute, many thought they had been drawn with soot. However, with each movement of the Princess' hands, those dark scales would move along, as if to confirm they were genuine. It was as if she had humanoid reptilian hands... and it was both mesmerizing and scary. The one more stunned than anyone was the King himself. He hadn't taken a step from where he stood, but his whole body was leaning forward as if held back by some invisible restraint. He was breathing heavily too, and a frown had appeared on his face, his expression torn between surprise, agitation, and confusion. The sight of the Princess' faint bow in front of him seemed to have thrown him into an inner turmoil. His lips parted as if he was about to say something, but before anything came out, Cessilia had already turned around, showing her back to him. Her back was dashing exposed by the dress' shape, leaving a few men in the audience speechless and blushing. It was bare all the way down to her waist, showing her superb figure and perfect skin, almost more eye-catching than the shimmering colors of her dress. Her long, chocolate curls weren't enough to hide her skin from male curiosity, and almost as soon as he realized it too, the King threw a circular glare at the audience, his fists tightening. Fortunately for them, all eyes were on the Princess, not the furious monarch. Not only her but following her steps, Tessa and Nana were both getting their share of admiring glances. The warrior was more impressive in her unique outfit, though. It was a stunning combination of a soldier's armor and a graceful, feminine silhouette. Her outfit wasn't as shiny as Cessilia's, but the shimmer was smartly highlighting her thin waist and broad shoulders, applied on the corset and shoulder pads. Not only that, but the long and fluid shape of her skirt made it hard to guess if she was wearing pants or a slitted skirt. Overall, it was an impressive fashion statement, confusing gender and yet exhibiting all of her physical traits. Moreover, she was showing off her cleavage, had undone her braids, making her hair much longer than her usual bob, and put some makeup on. While Cessilia looked like a mystical princess, Tessandra had the mightiness of a warrior queen. Finally, Naptunie followed behind them. Although her beauty didn't seem as exotic as the two young women before her, she had her own charm in a flamboyant, blue dress. The same broken glass had been used for a large belt to flatter her waistline, while the knee-length of her skirt, made of the same flying layers as Cessilia, showed off her tiny legs. In fact, that

dress wouldn't have worked on anyone but her. Her hair was also undone, and her generous chest was flattered by the triangle shape of her dress, which was held in a cute ribbon around her neck. With this and her white nacre jewelry, she looked adorable, like a little water fairy. Altogether, the trio was easily gathering all of the attention in the room, but as soon as Cessilia walked away from the King, Tessa and Nana followed her, and the young ladies who had just made quite an entrance walked up to the two Counselors, as if completely unaware of all the eyes on them. "Ladies," smiled Yassim, bowing politely as if to play along. "You're absolutely stunning, all three of you."

"Th-thank you, Yassim," said Cessilia.

"My little Nana!" exclaimed Yamino. "My little niece is all grown up now, you look like a lovely young lady!"

"U-Uncle!"

Yamino's loud laughs and teasing of his niece made their little group smile, but it was a bit hard to pretend they didn't notice the silence around them. Bit by bit, the orchestra was trying to pick up the rhythm, although all the attention was on the foreigners' group. Not only that but in the middle of the room, Vena was standing alone, her hand somewhat mid-air, completely stunned by what had just happened. It had only been a matter of seconds between Cessilia's entrance, her bow to the King, and her walking away, but now, reality was starting to hit slowly, as if time resumed for everyone else. Inevitably, many stares fell on the young lady left alone and utterly embarrassed in the middle of the banquet hall. Finally, she let her hand fall down, and instead, clenched it into a fist, glaring at the Princess. Her anger and embarrassment were blurring her judgment and thus, right now, she was feeling like the main cause of her humiliation was the foreign Princess, not the King who had ignored her. She turned her step toward their little group, and walked over there angrily, her heels loud against the polished floor. Several people even hurriedly jumped out of her way, although everyone remained close to witness the next part of the act.

"You barbaric bitch!" she hissed. "How dare you interrupt and walk ahead of me?!"

Cessilia barely glanced at the woman before Tessandra stepped in between, glaring at their attacker. Because of her

heels and outfit, she was even more impressive than usual, and despite her animosity, Vena slowed down before she got any closer, surprised by the young woman's dark eyes on her.

However, Nana was the first one to respond, just as angry as Tessandra, although she didn't have her impressive frame.

"Lady Vena! Watch your language in front of Princess Cessilia!"

"I'm not talking to you, you fat pig. I'm surprised you even dared to be here! Is everything easier now that you have a

rich friend to make you think you actually have a chance? Or that you're of any importance, for that matter?"

Far from being upset, Naptunie scoffed, taking another step forward.

"That's it, Lady Vena? Attacks about my physique, like always? Do you think being skinny gives you an advantage?"

Well, I'm sorry you don't cultivate your mind more than your body, because it would save you and the Pangoja Clan a lot of embarrassment right now! No wonder His Majesty won't even look at you!"

"You damn little...!"

Vena raised her hand as if to hit Naptunie, who wasn't shying away from the threat. A dark-green hand caught her wrist right before her slap landed. Suddenly shocked by the scales in front of her eyes, she screamed in panic.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she shrieked, desperate to have her wrist released.

She struggled frantically, trying to pull away and free her wrist, but Tessa wasn't flinching at all, effortlessly keeping her trapped in her grasp. She seemed as strong as a metallic trap holding the hysterical candidate's wrist.

"...Nana," she calmly said, "isn't it against the rules to harm another candidate?"

"It is," nodded Nana. "Lady Vena should be grateful you stopped her. I would have gladly taken that slap if it could prevent such an immature girl from ever being our Queen!"

Vena didn't even seem to hear them; the sight of the green scales had her utterly panicked, and she had completely given up on her dignity. However, Tessandra wasn't done with her. She forcefully pulled that woman closer, tightening her grasp even more and making that girl scream.

"Stop screaming like a piglet. Next time you insult Naptunie or Cessilia, I'll break this skinny wrist of yours, you little swine. Remember, I'm not a candidate. I don't care if I break each of your bones one by one and feed you to our dragon."

Those words nearly made the girl pass out. Luckily for her, though, Tessandra finally released her grip, and Vena stumbled backward until a man, probably from her clan, caught hold of her, and quietly took her out of the banquet hall under their audience's eyes. As soon as she was out, everyone quickly resumed their conversations, or most likely their gossip, from the way no one really dared to speak out loud... Tessandra chuckled, crossing her arms.

"Those little leeches... They should be glad I can't really kill here. Those girls are just cats trying to play in a lion's den. I'm proud of you, Nana. Turns out you got some spark in you!"

"Don't tell me about it," mumbled Nana. "I only got angry because she insulted Lady Cessilia. Now I'm trying to pretend my hands are not shaking... Can we get something to drink? I need something. Or to eat. I saw some delicious-looking

cakes over there...”

“I’ll accompany you,” chuckled Yamino. “I could use a drink myself, and let’s get some for Princess Cessilia and Yassim...”

As those three walked away to the tables aligned against the walls, Cessilia and Yassim remained alone. The

Counselor hadn’t missed how the Princess very purposely turned her back to the throne, nor the way she attracted many eyes on her, including the monarch’s.

“That was quite an entrance, Lady Cessilia.” He smiled. “I was looking forward to your talent, but I never expected to

see this much. I only feel sorry you got injured to make all this...”

The Princess nodded, her green eyes going down on her reptilian-looking hands.

“A b-bit of sacrifice t-to t-teach those evil p-people a lesson,” she said. “I am not d-done either. I b-believe in pplaying

fair, and I will even th-the score t-tonight.”

“I will look forward to it, my lady. Shall we dance in the meantime?”

“I d-don’t really know th-the art of d-dancing here.”

“That makes two of us lacking in that area, then,” said a feminine voice approaching.

Appearing next to them was a tall and slender woman sporting a very dark red dress.

Unlike the other candidates, her

dress was rather simple, but displayed some incredibly detailed embroidery, and so did all of her jewelry, looking uniquely

crafted rather than ostentatious. She had obviously chosen to show off a more bohemian style than luxurious, and even her hair

was simply held up in an artistic updo, with many seashells and pearls. Her face was also marked by unique makeup, with

white lips and white eyelashes.

Much to Cessilia’s surprise, the woman bowed slightly but very politely. There was something unique and graceful in

the way she moved, almost like a dance.

“I am Bastat, daughter of the Sehsan Tribe Leader.”

“Nice t-to meet you, I’m Cessilia of the D-Dragon Empire.”

“I know who you are, Princess. I was eager to meet you even before seeing you, but now, I am equally impressed by

your skill. I had never seen anyone make such amazing use of broken glass before.”

“Th-thank you.”

“The Sehsan Tribe is known for their unique craftsmanship,” said Yassim. “They have been considered as the

Kingdom’s cultural and artistic core for generations already.”

“My tribe is one of the oldest in the Kingdom,” nodded Bastat. “Our people remember the times when we got along

with the powerful Dragon Empire. It is such a shame how things have changed, but we were looking forward to meeting you,

Princess Cessilia. My father couldn’t be present tonight, but he asked me to formally extend an invitation for you to visit our

main house.”

Cessilia was very surprised for a few seconds. It was the first time one of the other candidates, other than Naptunie, was openly polite and cordial to her. Although Bastat seemed much more reserved and dignified, she saw no evil intent in her actions, and in fact, the young woman seemed extremely polite. Not only that, but considering she was representing her whole tribe, it seemed there was another clan openly welcoming her to the Kingdom.

“I would love t-to, Lady B-Bastat.”

“It will be my pleasure to show you, Princess Cessilia. Come and find me whenever you feel like going.”

“I will. Th-thank you to you and your f-father for th-the invitation.”

Bastat politely bowed once more and left, leaving Cessilia and Yassim alone once again.

“The Sehsan Tribe is very peaceful, but also very reserved,” noted Yassim. “I’m impressed they already reached out to you, but I believe they are hoping to extend their trades to the Dragon Empire. Their leader is a very wise man, but a bit cunning in his own ways.”

“Th-thank you, Yassim. I will look forward t-to visiting th-them, still.”

Cessilia had a bit of personal interest in craftsmanship and artisans, and from what she could see on Bastat’s dress and hairdo, it might also benefit the Empire to resume relationships with their only neighbor...

After the incident from earlier, it was clear Lady Bastat was the only one brave enough to approach their group. As

soon as Tessandra, Nana, and Yamino joined them again, carrying food and drinks, no one else dared to come near. A lot of

people had their eyes on them, though, and while the dances, music, and chatter resumed, it was clear the attention was still

largely on their group, even when one of the candidates, Lady Axelane of the Nahaf Family, stepped forward. It was clear that

the young lady had a plan in mind and a lot of support. As soon as she got to the center of the hall, several young people

simultaneously moved to request that people give her space, install a little stool, and put a large instrument in front of her, some

sort of wooden container with many strings Cessilia and Tessa had never seen before.

Then, she began her performance, not

only playing that instrument but also singing. The melody was genuinely beautiful, and the instrument made beautiful sounds,

but her voice was rather average. She sang well, but her beauty was what mesmerized the audience.

When she was done, most of the audience clapped, except for the candidates, their entourages, and the King. Much to

Cessilia’s annoyance, Jisel was also loudly clapping her hands together, although she was standing next to the throne and close

to the King... Following his mistress, Cessilia's eyes inevitably fell on Ashen. It was clear the King had absolutely no interest in the lady or her performance. Perhaps his eyes hadn't left her for a second since she had entered the room, but Cessilia had been so obviously trying to ignore him that she couldn't tell. Cessilia averted her eyes, turning away from him and back to the center of the banquet hall, where Axelane was bowing as if she had gotten a perfect standing ovation, before many young men flooded her to request a dance. Unlike Vena, the young lady didn't make the mistake of requesting anything from the King and acted shy and polite to her suitors instead. After her, the dances resumed for a while before another candidate stepped up, this time, Safia from the Yekara Clan, making Tessandra grimace. Just like her predecessor, she obviously had decided to emphasize a lot on her beauty, presenting a solo dance performance and sending the King long, lascivious glances. It would have been very painful to watch without Tessandra's witty comments, which made Cessilia and Naptunie chuckle all along. When it ended, it was clear the candidate had once again impressed the audience, but not the King. Ashen looked bored to death on his throne, and even ignored his mistress' comments, dismissing her with a movement of his hand. Far from looking upset, Jisel finally stepped down to go and dance with a young man, serving polite smiles and glances all around. "They are mistaking this for a beauty contest," scoffed Tessandra behind her cup. "Well, we shall enjoy ourselves regardless," chuckled Yassim. "Lady Naptunie, would you offer me a dance?" The two of them went dancing, and much to her own surprise, a brave young man also stepped forward to invite Tessandra for a dance, although he seemed extremely tense and nervous. Cessilia pushed her cousin to go and enjoy herself, convincing her that she should practice for when she would get a chance to dance with Naptunie's handsome older brother... Cessilia remained with Uncle Yamino, who was already a bit drunk in his seat. She couldn't enjoy the dances, but she watched Tessandra and Naptunie seemingly having fun, sending them smiles when their eyes met. However, doing nothing and standing to the side, she felt a bit bored. She had never been fond of the banquets held by her aunt at home, either, too crowded for her introverted nature. Luckily, the next performance to start seemed more interesting. Displaying a strange machine made of wood, metal, and a candle, Bastat requested the whole banquet room to be put in the dark, most candles blown out but hers, to offer the audience a magnificent show of shadows against the walls of the room. In a few seconds, everyone was completely

entranced by the darkness of the room, and the magnificent light show, listening to Bastat's explanations of her own creation.

In the midst of all this, no one witnessed the King leaving his throne and the hall through a back door, nor the hand that pulled Cessilia away from the crowd just a moment later.

Chapter 9

The reason Cessilia hadn't resisted the pull was simply out of sheer surprise and confusion. The room had been in the dark just before, and she had barely realized what was going on nor where she was being dragged to. It only took a matter of seconds too. Opening a door on the side of the room, Ashen pulled her with him onto the balcony circling the banquet hall.

They were on one of the high towers of the castle, and aside from the main doors the guests had come in and out from, and the small door behind the throne, all the other doors on the side led to that very balcony. It wasn't the best weather to be outside in. The storm was loud above them, and the clouds dark. A rainfall had begun, landing big droplets on them and threatening to inundate the little balcony in seconds if it wasn't for the draining system.

Cessilia didn't care much about the tempestuous weather, though; the cause of her distress was the man who had dragged her there. She glared at him the second she realized it was Ashen. When he felt they were far enough from the door, both of them barely protected against the stone wall, Ashen turned around to face her. Cessilia suddenly turned her wrist and broke herself free in one movement, taking him by surprise. It was one brutal, quick gesture that showed her annoyance at him, but Ashen didn't protest, only pulling his hand back with a sullen expression.

"...Sorry about that," he muttered. "I needed to talk to you alone."

Unsatisfied, Cessilia crossed her arms and looked away from him, at the waves crashing against the rocks below. She clearly had no intention to make this easy for him.

"Listen... I don't want us to fight, Cessilia. I... missed you. I never even thought that you'd come back, and now that you're here, you ignoring me is torture. Do you have any idea how many men were staring at you, while you purposely won't even let me look at you? I'm barely keeping myself from murdering my own men for that!"

She didn't even react to his words or his pleading eyes. Ashen slowly realized it was all his fault. He never thought for even a moment that it would be harder to look upon her face, while she was still giving him the cold shoulder. Cessilia's icy gaze was directed at the sea, refusing to look at him, and yet, he couldn't bring himself to be mad at her, not even for a second.

She was beautiful. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and it wasn't just about her physical appearance. It was

in the way she appeared both strong and fragile, fearless but shy. The way the rain slowly ran down her curls he was dying to brush with his hands. Her pale lips, her slender cheeks, her green gaze, cold like an emerald. Something in him was screaming to hold her, right now, but he was holding on to his last strings of willpower not to cross that dangerous line. He sighed and brushed his white hair back, glancing at the window behind her, showing the room inside still in the dark.

“Cessilia, I... I know I've treated you too harshly. I was so confused after I had thought I'd never see you again. I directed my anger at you, and I shouldn't have. I've thought about this often. I knew it would have been reckless to bring you to war with me. Those two years were the best of my life, and brutally, your father rejected me and chased me away, back into my own Kingdom still torn apart by civil war. I was barely seventeen, and I had just gotten back on my feet! ...Can you even understand how painful that was for me? I was scared, confused, and angry. I felt like I was given hope, only to have it all crushed again. I considered your family my own, and you all welcomed me so warmly too! I never wanted to leave, Cessilia. I would have never wanted to leave, but your father didn't even give me that choice.” Anger appeared in his expression again, and he glared at the wall behind her, clenching his fists at the memory. He was shaking, not because of the cold but because of how painful that memory was. The feelings of that time were all coming back, too hard to endure. Ashen made sure not to direct his ice-cold gaze at Cessilia, but even so, the Princess wasn't looking at him. She seemed to be hearing him while trying not to listen and refused to move or look his way. They were standing less than two steps away from one another; they were too close for her not to hear him. His large body was partially shielding her from the rain that had intensified, and the wind that was whipping his skin. Ashen's white hair was floating around his face, while Cessilia's curls were still down, barely moving as no breeze reached her. She was both shielded and cornered. Ashen scoffed bitterly.

“...You probably don't even know what happened that night. I knew your mother had noticed my feelings toward you, but as always, she trusted me. I was always aware I shouldn't have loved you, but... I couldn't help it. Our age difference was driving me insane, so I pretended not to see you were feeling the same, for as long as I could. Somehow, I had this hope that as you grew older, we would finally be free to love each other. It became real torture over time. The older you got, the more beautiful you became... I knew my own feelings for you had grown from innocent fondness to love, and as you started to look

more and more like a woman, it just became too hard to pretend not to see it. When you began to show you were loving me back, I felt like the gods were trying to tear me apart.”

As if to emphasize his words, the storm thundered loudly above their heads. The rain was starting to pour now, and Ashen moved closer to Cessilia, trapping her between him and the castle’s wall. He meant to shield her from the downpour, but she was pinned under him, and it was harder to avoid his burning gaze on her. She was regretting that low cut in her back, and trying to stay away from the cold stone behind her.

Just then, Ashen sighed, and in a swift movement, undid his fur cape to place it on her shoulders. Cessilia tried to take it off, but as soon as her hand grabbed it over her shoulder, Ashen’s fingers caught it. This time, she glared back at him, not avoiding his dark eyes anymore. The King didn’t seem to mind at all. His eyes were on her, and he resumed talking, strangely calm for once.

“I would have never, ever touched you when you were that young, Cessilia. When... when we kissed for the first time, I understood that. Rather than unleashing my desire, it gave me the power to restrain it. For you. I knew I could wait for as long as it took, but... I never thought your father wouldn’t trust me.”

By now, the rain was running down his drenched hair and face and had begun to drip down Cessilia’s too. Still, his hand was hot over hers, and grabbing it tightly despite the sharp scales. He didn’t want to let go, and wouldn’t. She had stopped fighting him, but her eyes went away from his again, her lips pinched together in a bitter expression. That memory wasn’t just painful for him.

“That night, when Krai found us outside of the Onyx Castle, and Kassian took you home, I thought they’d just be mad at me for taking you out late. But your father and Darsan dragged me to the border. They told me to leave the Empire, and to never approach you again!”

He released her hand, clenching his fists by his side, overtaken by anger again. He shook his head, visibly furious.

“I begged them, Cessilia. I begged your father and brother a thousand times to let me back in, to forgive me. I swore I had never touched you, and I would never touch you until you were an adult. I had even thought I’d wait till your seventeenth birthday, just like the age your parents got together!”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Several, even, trying to calm himself down.

“I... I swear I’m not mad at you. I knew there was no way you’d come, but I still waited. I waited for days, hoping to see you, and at the same time, a part of me didn’t want you to meet me there. I knew you’d be too young to follow me to my

Kingdom when you had only known the peace of your family's Empire. So I left. I left, with my anger and my rancor, and I used it to fuel my desire to reconquer this place. It's still... a work in progress, but I got rid of so many people who were aligned with my father, and those who opposed me. I'll soon be the King of a peaceful Kingdom, and then, I'll truly be able to show your father he was wrong about me!"

He had almost shouted that last sentence, and when he realized that, his eyes went to the side, where the nearest window was. No one seemed to have heard, though. Luckily, the walls and tinted windows were thick, and with the raging storm above them, most of his words were blown away by the wind.

Cessilia was the only one there to hear him, but the Princess' expression remained as cold and still as a statue. It wasn't as if she didn't listen; she simply didn't care what he had to say. She kept ignoring him, putting that invisible but thick wall between them. This vision broke Ashen.

"Don't you have anything to say?" he muttered.

She turned her eyes back to him, and for a second, his heart was filled with hope that she'd talk, finally, but his hope was cut short. Cessilia stared blankly, and suddenly, the vision of her expression when he had told her to shut up hit him like a slap. He had done this. She had tried to talk, and he had dismissed her, twice. Now, he was willing to talk, but she didn't want

to anymore. He was reaping what he sowed, and it was those cold, green eyes on him. It wouldn't have been so hard to endure if she hadn't looked so beautiful in that instant.

She was like a goddess under the rain and storm, not fearing him, not allowing him anything. She seemed so fragile and so small in front of him, yet he knew

he had already lost to her. He couldn't win, not when he loved her so much, so painfully. Not when she had that cold mix of anger and resentment in her eyes. Not when he was the one who had broken that bridge she had desperately tried to build between them, after all this time. It was his fault.

"Cessilia, I'm sorry," he muttered, stepping closer.

She backed against the wall, and a faint dash of pink appeared on her cheeks. She was suddenly desperate to avoid his gaze, but she couldn't hide her reactions well. There was still something between them, something that made them warm despite the cold and driving rain.

"Cessi, I'm really sorry."

Her lower lip twitched, and for a second, with all those drops running down her face, it looked as if she was crying.

Perhaps she really was, but it was hard to tell. Ashen took a deep breath and leaned down to kiss her.

It was a passionate, almost forceful kiss. However, for the first two or three seconds, Cessilia didn't resist it. She responded to it, even. In that very brief moment, the passion between them ignited like a burning fire. Their lips acted on their own, left to their own desires. It wasn't like the innocent kiss of their younger years. This one was full of passion, thirst, and even some rage. They didn't breathe, just kissing wildly for the handful of seconds it lasted.

Cessilia brutally snapped out of it. So brutally, she slapped him with the back of her hand, furious and glaring at him for kissing her like that. She was angry he had dared to take her by surprise, and angrier she hadn't resisted it earlier.

Shaken up, Ashen was brutally slapped back to reality. He took a step back, and his fingers touched his cheek, feeling the two small cuts. Cessilia's scales had scratched him. It was involuntary, and in fact, he didn't care at all for that injury. He was much more hurt by how violently she was rejecting him, and glaring at him. This made him angry too.

"You just felt that too! You don't hate me, Cessilia, you still love me, so why do you do this to me?! What do I have to do for you to speak, and be honest!"

He was running out of patience, but so was the Princess. Using her two hands, she pushed him off of her, finally putting some distance between their bodies. She looked really upset this time, and kept her hands up between them, as if to prevent him from coming near again.

"Cessilia!"

"D-don't ever d-do th-that again," she painfully muttered with a hoarse voice.

Despite what she said, hearing her speak to him again brought a wave of relief to Ashen. He nodded faintly, but he knew she really was angry. He had rarely seen her angry before, but Cessilia was almost as scary as her father when she was mad, and he'd rather not do that to her again.

If he had hoped they could talk again, he was mistaken. She pushed him away from her and began to move to walk back inside, keeping her hands wrapped around herself. She visibly didn't dare to touch his fur cape around her, although she wouldn't take it off either.

"Cessilia!" he insisted, dying to grab her wrist again and have her stay there.

She stopped her steps, but she was already turned away from him, leaving Ashen to stare at her back again.

"I meant it," he continued. "I'm sorry. And I'm not mad at you. ...Can we talk? Not here, but..."

Cessilia turned her head, just enough that he could see her eye glaring at him between her drenched locks.

"We'll t-talk when you're d-done feeling sorry j-just for yourself."

Those words took Ashen by surprise, and he didn't react to it fast enough to prevent her from leaving again. He wanted to call her again and quickly tried to think of something to say.

"Your scales."

Cessilia stopped again, just a couple of steps away from the door. This time, though, she didn't look back. Ashen took a deep breath.

"...They weren't black before. Cece's scales weren't dark. ...Cessilia, what happened to your dragon?"

He saw her shoulders quickly rise from her breathing, but it might have been due to the storm and the wind blowing against her body. She was hesitating, but before Cessilia could answer, the door she was trying to get to slowly opened.

Jisel's appearance cut their conversation short. His mistress stood there, carrying an umbrella and a towel, glancing at the two of them. Despite Cessilia glaring at her, the redhead kept her usual mischievous smile on, unphased. Then, Cessilia directed her glare at Ashen and stormed off, angrily walking past his mistress.

Cessilia walked back into the hall drenched, upset, and very disturbed.

Luckily, another number was going on in the middle of the banquet, and despite the storm raging, no one seemed to notice her but Yassim, who hurried to her from a few steps away, visibly worried.

"My lady!" he whispered. "You're completely drenched! Are you alright?"

"Cessi, what the heck?" Tessa appeared behind him. "You were outside in that storm?"

For a few seconds, she couldn't speak, completely disoriented. Her head felt a bit dizzy, and she just shook it, her voice

too tight to speak. During that time, Yassim's eye fell on the fur cloak on her shoulders, and he glanced toward the throne,

where the King was also coming back to his seat. Just like the Princess, he was drenched and sat quietly with a sullen expression.

"Yassim, is there a room where we can take a break?" Tessa muttered. "I think Cessi could use a break... and a dry towel or two."

"No."

Cessilia pushed her cousin's hand away and directed her eyes to the center of the banquet hall, where another one of the candidates was bowing to the crowd.

"Yassim, p-please introduce me. I want t-to do my p-performance now."

"Are you sure, my lady?" Yassim asked, a bit worried. "You're completely drenched."

"Yes. N-now."

Yassim and Tessa exchanged a look, but they could tell the Princess was set on her decision. Not only that, but she was wearing the King's fur cape he had on previously, and they could roughly guess something had happened between the two.

Despite the entertainment provided by another one of the candidates in the middle of the room, it was clear the King's absence hadn't gone unnoticed, and now, more glances were going their way, trying to make sense out of the drenched Princess' short absence. Some were whispering and not even trying to conceal their suspicious stares, even when Tessa glared back. Perhaps it was indeed better for her cousin to take a stance now. "...Fine," muttered Tessa. "I was getting bored of this shitshow anyway. We might as well provide the entertainment ourselves..."

Above them, the sounds of thunder got louder, and a few worried glances went to the windows, the rain pelting against the glass. The storm was getting worse outside, and some servants quietly went to check the doors to the balcony, the same ones Cessilia had just come back from, to make sure they would hold. It was clear no one could go outside now. Nobody in the room would have considered it anyway. Instead, they were all absorbed in the foreigner's strange appearance, and the way her body slowly moved toward the center of the banquet hall. Despite being drenched, Cessilia had lost none of her beauty, and if anything, the droplets running down her dress made it even shinier. The fur cloak she had kept on was also gathering some attention, with some people glancing the King's way before going back to her. Cessilia wasn't looking at any of them, though. Instead, she had her eyes on the floor, as if she deliberately avoided staring at anyone, and kept walking until she found herself in the center of the room. Only then did she finally raise her head to glance at the audience.

"Introducing Lady Cessilia, Imperial Princess of the Dragon Empire," said Yassim's voice behind her, loud enough for all to hear. "First daughter of the War God and Water Goddess." "...M-most of you already kn-know who I am," said Cessilia. "A stutterer!" shouted one of the candidates with a smirk. Cessilia immediately glared back, her green eyes glowing with a fire this time. The woman who had spoken tried not to act scared, crossing her arms with a smirk on, but she still took a couple of steps back. She was the one who had performed just before, but Cessilia hadn't met this one yet. Perhaps she was related to one of the other girls. This was their first time seeing each other, so this woman had simply decided to insult her in the open, showing that Cessilia was not welcome there. She wasn't alone. Several chuckles and whispers were heard throughout the room, showing their unspoken support. However, this wasn't enough to intimidate Cessilia. Even Tessandra behind her smirked. "...I d-do stutter," Cessilia retorted, "b-but that's not all th-there is to know about-t me."

She took a step forward, staring at the audience as if she was daring anyone to speak up again. Despite her appearance, there was definitely an aura of power around her. Because she was taller than most women and also wearing heels, she easily dominated the room. Cessilia took the time to glance all around the room, as if she wanted to remember each face.

"It is t-true I am a d-daughter of the D-Dragon Empire. I am th-the Empress' niece and the War G-God's daughter, b-but here, I am only a foreigner who c-came to t-take the t-title of Qu-Queen."

She stepped to the side to glance at the people who were behind her previously. No one dared to speak up anymore, they were all absorbed by her deep voice and the confidence that radiated through her. Cessilia slowly moved her shoulders, making the fur cape fall from its resting place and land at her feet. She was looking in the opposite direction of the King, but unlike her, many people stared toward their monarch.

"You asked the c-candidates to d-display their t-talents here. If your g-goal is to find someone who c-can be worthy of b-becoming this K-Kingdom's Queen, th-then I will show you how serious I am about th-this."

She stepped on the fur coat, and raised her hands, showing her scales for all to see. Several people gasped in awe or fear. Perhaps some of them hadn't realized what was covering her skin or had mistaken it for fabric or makeup. Right now, though, it was impossible to be mistaken any longer. The dark scales were very visible under the lights, even more so whenever Cessilia moved. Each time she wiggled her fingers, the scales would move along to follow her movement, showing they were genuine. As if it wasn't enough, she rubbed her palm against her stomach, where the thousands of little pieces of glass had been sewn into the fabric. Her thick scales against the glass generated a sharp, high-pitched sound that made many people grimace.

"J-just like everyone in my family, I was b-born with the D-Dragon's B-Blood. My b-body is d-different from yours. I c-can heal faster. I am naturally stronger t-too."

"...This is ridiculous," scoffed the candidate from earlier. "So you have snake skin. Dragons may be real, but they have no power here, foreigner. You can't show off if you have nothing to back up your claim. This is not a talent befitting a real queen!"

Cessilia immediately turned her head toward her.

"I have more p-power than you," Cessilia retorted, glaring back at that woman. "I am getting t-tired of you underestimating me b-because you d-don't know me. You th-think I am weak b-because I stutter. You th-think you're b-better

because you c-can sing or d-dance. You think you c-can hurt me and scare me int-to going b-back.”

Above their heads, the sky suddenly thundered as if to support her words. Many people turned their scared eyes toward

the sky, but Cessilia and the candidate were still glaring at each other.

“You’re all show,” spat the other candidate. “You and your friend have been acting as if you are above everyone else, haven’t you? Do you think anyone would want a queen from a country that oppressed us?”

“You attacked the Dragon Empire,” scoffed Tessa. “You came looking for a fight, and against the Dragon Empire’s War

God, no less. What, were you expecting to be sent home with gifts, perhaps?”

“You guys are nothing without your dragons!” the candidate shouted back. “It’s easy to win a war when you have the most dangerous predator in this world at your service!”

Cessilia’s eyes went beyond the candidate’s shoulder, glaring at Ashen. The King knew right away what she meant to

say. He had mentioned the very same thing, just before. That with her father’s dragon, his war to claim back his Kingdom

would have been over in a matter of days... Ironically, it was one of his own citizens that was speaking against that idea right

now. Cessilia didn’t even have to do anything. She even faintly smiled, turning back to the brazen woman.

“...It’s t-true,” she said. “Th-things are easier when you have a d-dragon. Wars are easy t-to win. B-but some b-battles

can’t be won on open g-ground, c-can they?”

Just as she said that, another loud noise from outside took the audience by surprise.

This time, they weren’t so sure it

was the thunder. Some strange noises were coming from all over the roof, sounds that didn’t seem to quite match the storm

outside. Not only that, but after a few more seconds of sending worried glances all around, a few people noticed how some

windows seemed now strangely shielded from the rain that was still pouring on others...

“I d-didn’t come here to p-play,” continued Cessilia, ignoring them. “I d-did not c-come to p-play p-petty games with

other g-girls. I c-came here b-because this country needs a q-queen.”

“...You sound bloody arrogant to me,” hissed Safia this time, not far from the other candidate. “Aren’t you the one

parading around with all that gold? What happened, Princess? Ready to buy our Kingdom with all of your daddy’s gold?”

“It must sound familiar to you,” Tessandra retorted, “and unlike yours, the gold we wear, we own ourselves! I guess

working and earning your own money must still be quite a strange concept for a damn lazy b—”

“T-Tessa,” Cessilia said, raising her hand to cut her off.

Her cousin clicked her tongue with annoyance, still glaring at Safia.

"I d-don't care for my g-gold," said Cessilia. "Money can b-be earned again. I c-came here ready t-to use it in your KKingdom anyway. What I d-did not expect t-to find was that the p-people here are so scared of my g-gold they would d-dare rob me. Rob me, and t-try to hurt me with so many g-glass shards, hidden in my c-clothes. Like c-cowards."

"We are not scared of you!" Safia shouted back.

"You should b-be."

Just then, a loud growl was very clearly heard from above.

Many people screamed in fear, others froze. This time, there was no doubt. That was no thunder, but the growl of a

very, very large creature that moved on the roof around them. Safia and the other candidate looked terrified the most. Their eyes kept going around to see where the creature was, spotting movement behind the colored glass.

"It can't be..." muttered the other candidates. "We already know women of the Dragon Empire don't have dragons!"

"You might want to revise your old books," scoffed Tessandra. "Things have changed a lot in the last couple of decades... The daughters of the War God don't just have the Dragon Blood, they all have dragons now."

She didn't need to mention Krai wasn't Cessilia's dragon, but her father's. If Cessilia didn't mention it herself, there was probably no need to say it. Instead, Tessandra crossed her arms, watching the audience, ready to intervene if anyone tried to attack Cessilia.

It wouldn't be necessary, though. All eyes had gone from the Princess to the ceiling, most of them absolutely terrified.

Although there had been word that a dragon had been spotted in the sky recently, Krai had indeed remained out of most people's sights, and the few who had actually thought the information was real probably thought it had only come here to drop

off the Princess, and gone home right away. They couldn't have been more wrong...

"You... You c-can't have a d-dragon here!" Safia screeched. "It will murder us all!"

"No," said Cessilia, very calmly. "Not unless I a-ask it t-to."

That was the most frightening sentence to hear.

All terrified eyes went to the Princess, suddenly realizing this woman yielded much more power than she looked to

possess. Those who had found her beautiful now found her terrifying, and those who had found her pitiable with her stutter now

found her imposing. They didn't have time to admire her any longer, though. From somewhere above, one of the windows

suddenly burst open, shards of glass raining down on the banquet. Luckily, the few people nearby had time to run away before

they were stabbed, and only the table below was covered in glass. Cessilia had done nothing to prevent this, which was clearly

some form of warning as well as retaliation. With the window broken open, the wind blew inside the room, blowing out most of the candles. The room turned even darker than before, but there was one bright light nobody missed.

A bright red eye appeared at the window, glancing down at all the small humans in there.

“D-don’t scream.”

In fact, many people’s cries died in their throats with Cessilia’s warning. They wanted to scream in terror, try and run

away, but now that she had said not to, everyone was scared of what would happen if they did, leaving many with their mouths

open and a strange grimace stuck on their faces.

No one dared to move. Cessilia was the only one who slowly walked there. To many people’s surprise, she kicked her

heels off, and stepped fearlessly on the broken glass on the floor, and as her skirt floated around her legs, the black scales

could be seen again, covering her feet more safely than any pair of shoes. The Princess walked until she was under the

window, and while glancing up at the dragon’s large red eye, she smiled.

“G-give th-them to me now, p-please.”

Another growl was heard, loud enough to have even the bravest people shiver in utter fear. Then, obeying her, the

dragon moved up. Its body could be seen rubbing against the opening, the large black scales scrolling endlessly for several

seconds. They could easily guess the size of that creature from the noises made all around the ceiling.

Finally, something that looked like a reptilian paw appeared, its sharp claws holding onto something. Krai threw it

inside with one movement. The two things rolled on the floor, and in the darkness, it took the people a few seconds to realize.

“Bodies!” someone screamed.

“They are still alive,” announced Tessandra, “...at least for now.”

“Th-these are th-the men who ransacked our r-room,” declared Cessilia, loudly. “Th-the only reason th-they are alive is

b-because I k-know there was someone who c-commanded them to d-do it.”

Indeed, the two men appeared to be breathing and still alive, but even then they were in a less-than-enviable state. Both

were covered in blood, their clothes and bodies looking to have been deeply lacerated in multiple areas, most likely from the

dragon’s rough handling. The two men were unconscious, dirty, and looked poorly dressed. Even without more explanation, it

was clear the only reason those bandits would have dared to commit a crime in the Royal Castle was under someone’s orders.

Many people exchanged glances, curious as to what she was going to do with those people.

“You... You have no proof, anyway,” said Safia, her voice shaking. “Even if those people talk, you might have scared them to say any name!”

“...Thank you for the advice, Lady of... What was it, the Yekara Clan?” retorted Tessandra with a smirk.

Safia went white, as did many of the people who had been around her all this time. She was clearly regretting opening her mouth at this very moment. However, Cessilia’s green eyes went to her without any anger in them; the Princess’ calmness was dominating the room.

“I d-didn’t p-plan to interrogate th-them,” said Cessilia. “Th-this is a warning t-to their masters. You all wanted t-to see it, d-didn’t you? My p-performance t-tonight is exactly th-this. I am a d-daughter of the D-Dragon Empire. Th-this is the last t-time you underestimate me. I will not let-t you g-get away with it next t-time.”

Just as she finished her sentence, Tessandra moved forward and swung her sword twice. Swish, swish. The blade just shone once in the air before the blood flew. It splattered Safia’s dress, and something landed at the candidate’s feet. She screamed at the sight of the freshly cut hand.

“That one’s for hurting our friend,” said Tessandra. “Next time, I’m sending you their heads.”

Safia’s hysterical screams covered most of her words though. Tessandra shrugged, and cleaned her blade calmly, while

the audience around them was still rendered utterly speechless. Everyone was now genuinely terrified of those two young

women, almost more than they were of the dragon above their heads.

King Ashen was the only one to stare with excitement in his eyes. His fists clenched, his body forward, and his hectic

breathing, his chest was going up and down as if he had just witnessed a show he was incredibly proud of and excited about.

He was almost off his throne to go and run to her, but Cessilia wasn’t looking.

Suddenly, someone began to clap in the audience. A bit shocked, eyes looked around for who had the guts to be

applauding the Princess at this moment, until they spotted her.

Jisel. In the crowd, she was smiling from ear to ear, staring at the Princess and clapping slowly, in total disruption of

the atmosphere in the room. She almost looked a bit crazy to be clapping like this, as if this was just a nice show... Then, Bastat

began to clap too, followed by another anonymous candidate. One by one, a few people found the strength to applaud, but it fell

a bit flat, a bit out of place... especially when the Princess glared at the King’s mistress like that.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

The strident voice coming from the main doors seemed to wake everyone up from a very strange nightmare. All eyes

turned to the doors, where a young servant suddenly ran into the banquet room, disregarding everyone there, and threw herself at the feet of the King.

“My King! A murder! There was a murder!”

“What?” hissed the King, jumping to his feet.

“Lady Vena of the Pangoja Clan was found dead! Someone murdered her!”

Many panicked whispers rose in the room, but Jisel’s chuckle came to Cessilia’s ears.

“Oh my, I did not think this banquet would be that interesting... I’m glad I came after all!”

The King’s mistress was the only one enjoying herself there. Everyone else was in shock, and several people, most

likely from the Pangoja Clan, let out loud cries and screams.

“My King, it can’t be!” shouted an older man.

“Wasn’t she here just a while ago?” frowned Axelane, the candidate from the Nahaf Family.

“What happened?” asked Ashen, glaring down at the servant. “Speak!”

“I... I just left the lady for a few minutes to go and get her some water, but when I came back, I found my poor lady dead

in her room, lying in so much blood! Someone violently stabbed her multiple times, my King, it was a murder!”

“Guards!” the King shouted. “Guard the doors to this hall, no one comes in and no one leaves until my return!”

He angrily stormed off, briefly glancing at Cessilia on his way out. It was a brief, fleeting moment that lasted less than a

second when their eyes met. Cessilia tried to look away, but it was already too late.

After a slight hesitation, she turned her

gaze to stare at Ashen’s back as he left the room, then at the doors after they were closed behind him. Even after the King’s

departure, things were chaotic in the hall. Many women were crying, and some men were angrily shouting, some trying to

convince the Royal Guards to let them leave the room to go see Vena’s body as well.

In the midst of this, Cessilia sighed faintly and picked up the fur cloak she had previously taken off. She softly brushed

it, making sure no little shards of glass were on it. Meanwhile, Nana quietly walked up to her and Tessandra, the Counselors

behind her, visibly scared too.

“I can’t believe she was really killed... That there’s a murderer in the castle...” Nana muttered, her lips trembling.

“No one mentioned the murderer had to be human,” said the candidate from before.

“Lady Ashra, I suggest you measure your words,” Bastat calmly declared.

Cessilia suddenly realized that candidate was the one they had seen with Jisel previously, along with Vena. She hadn’t

recognized her, since her hairdo and clothes had changed, plus she had only seen that woman briefly from afar. Ashra of the

Yekara Clan. Just like her cousin Safia, this woman looked arrogant and vain. She shrugged at Bastat’s words, crossing her

arms with a little smirk.

“Did I say anything wrong? The Princess just showed off her man-killing beast, did she not? Was I mistaken, that you threatened to murder your enemies?”

“My p-point is that I will not stoop d-down t-to your level,” Cessilia retorted. “I d-don’t do th-things in secrecy, and I d-don’t need t-to hide what I am c-capable of. I won’t lower myself or p-put on a p-play t-to make you satisfied.”

“That’s one rare skill around here,” scoffed another candidate, one of the other two that hadn’t been introduced yet.

“Most ladies here play nice in public and hide their claws... For someone to act the opposite is one change I’d like to see happen.” From her skin that was a shade slightly paler than most people in the room, and how she seemed to be among the rare candidates to respect her, Cessilia guessed she was Ishira, the candidate of the Hashat Family. Dressed in a long, indigo-blue dress, she bowed politely to the Princess as their eyes met, confirming her pacific intentions.

“Already ready to follow in the Princess’ shadow, Hashat?” scoffed Safia. “So typical of your clan of cowards...”

“You’re the one who should watch it,” Ishira hissed back.

“We’re only speaking the truth. Moreover, the Princess left the room earlier, didn’t she? I saw her leave, just a while before Vena was murdered. Why would she leave the banquet at all, when we weren’t done presenting ourselves, and plus, to return afterward? Her room isn’t so far, either. It’s only facts. She had the time, and a motive to kill Vena, didn’t she? One less candidate, wouldn’t you have been relieved to take that eyesore out of your way?”

“Lady Safia!” protested Naptunie, furious. “How dare you make such accusations?! Lady Cessilia is innocent, she only left for a short while, and why would she kill Lady Vena?!”

“Who knows,” shrugged Safia, visibly amused to have everyone’s attention, and to sow some doubt around. “Perhaps the Princess thinks this whole competition isn’t worth the trouble.”

“It’s not the t-trouble t-to murder someone either,” said Cessilia, annoyed. “I d-don’t need t-to lie or cheat.”

“Unlike some people we know,” scoffed Tessandra.

“How dare you accuse us of cheating?!”

“You’re welcome to return our gold anytime, then. Don’t you play Miss Righteous with us any longer. First, our room was ransacked, and now another candidate was killed. How much dirtier is this going to get?”

“She has a point,” said Bastat, crossing her arms. “None of the clans will follow a queen that gets her way with tricks, lies, and murders. Lady Cessilia may have brought a dragon, but she also proved she didn’t need one.”

“How is that?!” shouted Safia. “What can she do without her dragon, then?”

“Are you by any chance blind?” said Ishira, sighing. “Her hands are like this because she manipulated glass to make herself a dress after her belongings were vandalized. It takes courage to purposely injure yourself, even if you have great healing abilities. Not only that, but she sent a warning rather than an act of revenge, and she bested us all in showing her abilities, those she used and those she didn’t. You can’t claim Princess Cessilia’s efforts were for naught, unless you really want to act blind. ...Oh, and please spare us your usual dramatic shock. Do not pretend, you were all gloating about how she would have nothing to wear tonight. Seems like you were quite off the mark.”

Safia’s mouth opened and closed several times, completely in shock at how Ishira had just defended Cessilia. She clenched her fists, humiliated like a child.

“I... I only heard it from the servants! And it doesn’t prove she had nothing to do with Vena’s murder! Or are you also going to pretend she couldn’t have done it? You all saw her leave too!”

Tessandra glared around, but this time, none of the candidates spoke up in their favor. Bastat and Ishira turned their heads, visibly deciding to ignore Safia’s claim or pay attention any longer. The other candidates were exchanging looks, either smiling at the idea of cornering the Dragon Princess, or simply curious as to what was to unfold next. In fact, while they waited for the King’s return, the whole audience seemed captivated by the fight between the beautiful ladies present. They were all whispering in low voices, unwilling to take part themselves but happy to witness. Behind the two candidates of the Yekara Clan, many people were glaring at the Princess, or whispering about how she could have murdered Vena. The only people invested were those who had been crying since earlier, Vena’s people, the Pangoja Clan. Their other candidate, Istis, had red eyes, but was visibly holding it in. Instead, she glared at Cessilia, stepping forward.

“Don’t you have anything to say for yourself, Princess?” she said. “You should at least explain where you were!”

Cessilia stared at her, unwilling to speak. She took a deep breath in and slowly shook her head.

“I d-did not k-kill her. Nor order anyone t-to do so.”

“That doesn’t tell us where you were!” shouted Ashra, a snarky smile on. “Could it be you have no one to take your defense, Princess? No witness to confirm wherever you went? Isn’t it odd, for someone always stuck with the Dorosef girl and that boyish woman?”

Next to Cessilia, Nana furiously clenched her fists, stepping forward, but Tessandra raised her hand, and faintly shook her head, telling her to stay back. Instead, Yassim stepped forward.

“Lady Ashra, you should not—”

“Shut up, old man. I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to the Princess. You stutter but you should at least be able to say something for yourself, no?”

“...That won’t be necessary.”

The calm voice took everyone by surprise.

With a faint smile on her face, Jisel stepped forward, her hands behind her back and an innocent look on. She was the

last person they had all expected to speak up right then. In fact, most had completely forgotten her presence at all. She had been

waiting in the shadows all this time, only to come out now. It was clear the King’s mistress was amused by the situation. Even

Ashra and Safia exchanged a stunned look. The redhead put her fingers to her lips, smiling at them, a smile that didn’t

foreshadow anything good.

“I’m impressed,” she said loud enough for all to hear. “His Majesty is gone, yet so many young ladies are eager to acquire justice themselves.”

“That’s not it,” declared Safia, frowning. “We were merely asking questions!”

“Really? I thought you were almost going to murder the Princess here and now. Or at least, scratch her face or

something. I am a bit disappointed.”

Everyone was shocked by her words, but there definitely was a hint of truth in them... They had been quite ruthless.

Jisel chuckled at their stunned faces.

“Do you have something to say?” asked Safia, impatient.

Cessilia noted how, unlike her cousin, Ashra had gone carefully silent right now, her eyes on the redhead. It was as if

she had forgotten Cessilia to focus on Jisel instead, with something more complex, like... fear in her eyes.

“I do,” said Jisel. “The Princess is innocent, I will vouch for her.”

“...What now?” exclaimed Tessa, raising her eyebrows.

Cessilia was just as confused. However, Jisel smiled at her briefly, before turning to Safia again.

“There, you have it. You wanted a witness, didn’t you? I saw where she went and when she came back. She did not kill

Lady Vena.”

“But—”

“Are you doubting my words?”

Jisel’s question held more threat than it seemed. Safia glanced toward her cousin, but seeing how passive Ashra had

gotten, she swallowed her saliva, and possibly her pride.

“Fine...”

However, Cessilia wasn’t fine. She wasn’t happy with having Jisel stand up for her, of all people. She didn’t

understand why that woman had done that.

Jisel smiled, visibly satisfied with the candidates dropping the whole subject, and slowly walked up to Cessilia.

Around them, no one dared to make loud comments anymore, and seemingly, the people from each tribe were talking between themselves, most likely about the murder. Hence, with most people forgetting about them, she freely approached Cessilia. Her eyes went to the fur cloak on the Princess' shoulders, and she chuckled.

"I've seen that ugly thing somewhere."

"I d-didn't need your help."

"I know. But I figured you wouldn't want to let the others know about what had really happened earlier. Am I wrong?"

Cessilia remained silent, refusing to give in to her questions. Jisel chuckled.

"So stubborn, Princess. That must come from your father, the War God. If your mother is like most of the long-lost Rain

Tribe, she is probably more... flexible."

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a look. Although they had suspected it all this time, it was quite odd to hear Jisel

mention the Rain Tribe. The redhead noticed and tilted her head.

"Oh, please. You must have realized, right? You and I are probably distant relatives or something..."

"Our mothers had told us most of the Rain Tribe was gone."

"Gone... or captured," said Jisel. "After all, your mothers were made slaves, weren't they? A concubine and a prostitute..."

Tessandra's eyes opened wide, and her hand went to her sword. Cessilia reacted fast, grabbing her wrist before she

pulled it out. Tessandra's hand froze, but she still glared at the mistress.

"How much do you know about my mother?" she hissed.

"Just a little," Jisel shrugged. "When the news spread that the War God's woman was white-skinned, it got some

attention even on this side of the border. The few who had survived the onslaught on the Rain Tribe tried to find out more,

naturally. The women who had been made slaves... like my own mother. I guess not everyone could have a beautiful ending,

though. She lived and died a slave, like most of those who had been captured. A handful lived long enough to be free again or

bear the bastard children of their masters. The Hashat Family has a few of those, as well, you must have heard."

She sighed and glanced toward the little group behind Ishira. Curiously, among all the people present there, they were

those who seemed to be glancing their way the most. Even more surprising, they didn't seem nearly ready to approach, some of them glaring at Jisel.

"...They don't seem fond of you," noted Tessandra.

"No. But not many people are, I would say. It's one of the privileges of being the King's mistress... Most people want

you dead, or in their bed.”

She turned to the Hashat Family and smiled at them suddenly, which made those people uncomfortable, and they all stopped staring. Jisel scoffed.

“...Cowards, most of them.”

“How in the hell did you get in the King’s bed, then...” muttered Tessandra.

“I was lucky... Someone left that spot empty.”

Cessilia drew out Tessandra’s sword with one movement. The blade flew in the air, so quickly and swiftly, no one but

Tessa realized at first. She stopped it one inch away from Jisel’s neck, her green eyes glaring at the young woman with

murderous intent. Even worse, Jisel smiled and tilted her head.

“You could, you know. I’m sure no one would cry... Absolutely no one, I promise.”

She seemed to almost be offering her neck, but that only made Cessilia more reluctant to kill that woman. Still, her fingers were shaking on the blade. It might have been even more visible if they weren’t covered in scales.

“C-Cessi...” Nana whispered, a bit worried.

Eventually, Tessa raised her hand, and slowly took the sword from Cessilia’s hands while the two women were still

glaring at each other. Around them, many eyes caught sight of the Princess almost killing the King’s mistress, and they were all

curious as to what was going on. One of the women seemed amused, the other furious. Jisel shrugged.

“I told you, I am not your enemy.”

“Don’t count on us braiding each other’s hair either,” retorted Tessandra.

“Oh, I know. However, I don’t have anything against you... unlike some of the ladies here. Perhaps you should think twice before making me your enemy.”

Outside of the room, Krai suddenly growled, making everyone jump, quickly reminded of the dragon’s presence. Its ruthless climbing on the building made strange sounds on the stone, and its growls were heard once again.

“...A dragon d-doesn’t share,” said Cessilia.

“Maybe he could learn to.”

“No.”

This time, the Princess turned around, walking toward the main doors and away from the women. She was fed up with

all this, and not in a mood to entertain her rival, or any of the others, anymore.

“Come on, Nana,” said Tessandra, gently pulling her to follow.

“But—”

“We’re done here. Let’s just go back before another bitch decides to annoy the heck out of us...”

Nana nodded and quickly followed behind Cessilia and Tessa. While the three women were about to head out, Cessilia

in front, the doors opened before them again. The King was back.

Cessilia briefly raised her eyes, spotting the blood on his hands, and his furious expression. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and she stepped aside, making a visible detour to avoid him. Ashen stopped and watched her leave, even staring at her back until it disappeared in the corridors. Then, his eyes went back in front, spotting his mistress, alone in the center of the room. She crossed her arms again with a little smirk, and turned around, walking toward the broken window. While the storm had quieted down, the dragon outside was still agitated, growling and making a ruckus. Jisel smiled, staring at the black scales through the hole.

“The War Dragon, huh...”

Another growl sounded, and Krai moved again, its red eye appearing at the window. Many people screamed in fear and stepped farther away, except for Jisel. Her smile disappeared.

“Oh, you can tell, can’t you? ...You’re not the only monster here.”

Chapter 10

“It’s beautiful,” Cessilia muttered.

She turned the vase in her hands, admiring the beautiful nacre mosaic on it, and how it shined superbly at each fragment of light. She could feel all of the craftsman’s hard work and passion in that object, the long hours spent perfecting it. The vase wasn’t perfect by any means, but it was beautiful that way. The little stains of the paint that were immortalized made it look like it had just been made. Next to her, Bastat nodded.

“You have a good eye, Princess. This one was made by one of our best potters. We attach an importance to objects that go far beyond their monetary value. Sadly, it also means we need to undersell our work.”

“...My mother would love these,” said Cessilia. “Do you have a few samples I could send home? I’m sure we could work together on establishing new trades between the Eastern Kingdom and the Dragon Empire. My grandmother is a well-known patron of the arts. I’m sure she would love one of these.”

“It would be our honor to send our best creations for the Imperial Family to see.”

Cessilia and Bastat both smiled, and their eyes went back to the amazing display. After the events of the banquet, the King had ended the reception, but the investigation was still ongoing. All the

candidates had been proven innocent, since they were attending the banquet at the time of the murder, so now they were free to do as they liked while the Royal Guards tried to find the culprit, if they could. The rain had continued all the next day, so they had remained in the castle and spent most of the day mending the rest of their ripped dresses and chatting with Nana. In the late afternoon, an invitation came from Bastat, who invited all three of them to visit the Arts Market, mostly composed of people

from the Sehsan Tribe.

Getting out of the castle felt good, after what had happened. Cessilia hadn't seen Ashen since, and she wasn't sure she wanted to. Bastat's invitation had come at the right time. Moreover, Tessandra had decided to go and train with the Royal Soldiers again, inviting herself to their training grounds, probably for another duel with Nana's brother. Naptunie had decided to keep following Cessilia, as she was also curious about the Arts Market she was unfamiliar with. She had a thousand questions for Bastat, who was incredibly patient in answering all of them.

"Aren't those too fragile for everyday use?" she asked, looking at another one of the pots. "I know the cheapest ones are made of glass or clay, and they are definitely not as pretty, but I would be worried about breaking it..."

"They are mostly meant for decorative purposes," nodded Bastat, "although our craftsmen have been working on making new ones for more pragmatic uses."

"Th-there are materials here I have never seen b-before," declared Cessilia, "and I am s-sure th-there are some we have in th-the Empire th-that are not c-common here. Our craftsmen c-could work t-together to bring even b-better and pprettier results."

"It is my belief, as well," Bastat said with her toneless voice. "I am glad Princess Cessilia thinks like us. Despite your presence, I was worried you would be reluctant to trade with our Kingdom. ...I am sorry you weren't properly welcomed here.

Last night's banquet was truly unsightly."

Naptunie pouted her lips, putting down the pot she had in her hands.

"That's for sure! I can't believe those girls' attitudes! Isn't the Yekara Clan overdoing it?"

Those girls just kept attacking

Lady Cessilia any chance they got!"

"They are afraid," said Bastat.

"Afraid?" repeated Cessilia, surprised.

The young woman nodded. Today, again, she was wearing a very unusual dress, made of several layers and a motley

mix of patterns and colors. Her hairstyle was also just as unique as it was during the banquet, meaning it was probably her

personal preference rather than a once-in-a-while kind of appearance. In fact, she was somewhat even more eye-catching

today, with layers of colored necklaces around her neck and large rings on her fingers.

"Although their candidates are trying to act otherwise, the Yekara Clan isn't fond of the White King," Bastat slowly

nodded. "Actually, they were probably happier in times of war, when they could be paid to work as mercenaries or raid cities

to take what they wanted. They would pretend to get rid of the criminals, but they also robbed the thieves and demanded

compensation for it.”

“That’s why they are not very popular,” added Nana. “All that was just a few years ago, so many of them still behave as

if they can do what they want and go unpunished. They got very rich from the years of civil war, but now they are afraid they will go back to just being one of many tribes.”

“Their candidates are probably set on becoming Queen no matter what. This way, they will be free to do as they want

again, under the pretense of working for the White King. However, no other clan will support that. Since the White King got rid

of the Kunu Tribe they were allied with, they have to be careful.”

The women moved on to the next shop, one that displayed a lot of jewelry this time.

Naptunie immediately jumped on

the stall, excited. She had no issues chatting and finding questions to ask the older lady that sold them, happy to chatter and

fawn over the little wooden pieces that came in many colors. Cessilia and Bastat stayed a bit behind, neither of them really

interested in that stall, only eyeing Nana’s movement from a few steps away. The

seriousness of their conversation wasn’t one

they could pursue inside such a little space, so they stood side by side in the little alley.

“...D-do you th-think th-they are b-behind Vena’s murder?” asked Cessilia.

“I can’t say for sure. However, the Pangoja Clan is most likely their biggest threat and main rival. Or so they would

both want to believe. In fact, those two probably never consider the other tribes as a real threat. Our Kingdom was so fractured

that each tribe kept to its own specialty and focused on its own survival for a long time.

We all had to become the best in what

we did and become essential to the other tribes to survive.”

“The K-Kunu were k-killed for opposing the K-King?”

“Indeed. Just like the Yekara, they weren’t fond of times of peace. They were amongst those who waged war against the

Dragon Empire too. Their leader publicly defamed the King several times for backing off from the war; they somehow

believed it could have been won if we attacked the Empire again. Foolish.”

“R-really?” muttered Cessilia, shocked.

“We might be separated by a border, but we knew of the previous Emperor’s death. The Kunu Tribe believed an

empress with no dragon would have been easier to defeat.”

Cessilia chuckled. The Kunu Tribe couldn’t have been more wrong. She could easily imagine her aunt jumping

headfirst into the battle despite her advisor’s pleas. She would have loved proving the Eastern Kingdom completely wrong

about their defenses. Although it wasn’t technically her dragon but her late father’s, Empress Shareen was the new master of

the Golden Dragon, which was still very much alive. The Eastern Kingdom obviously didn’t know dragons could outlive their

owners.

“What of the other c-clan that d-defied the K-King? I b-believe it was the Cheshi C-Clan?”

Bastat let out a long sigh, slowly crossing her arms.

“It is hard to tell where their loyalty lies. Unlike the Kunu, the Cheshi were entirely against the war. However, they were also against the former King, and now, they are against the White King too. Many believe our Eastern Kingdom won't be able to really recover or avoid more civil wars until we get a monarch the Cheshi Clan approves of.”

“Th-that's... surprising.”

“They might be against the King, but they are still waiting to see who he will pick as his Queen.”

Just as she had said that, Bastat's eyes went to Cessilia, with a very serious expression on. She seemed more mature than her age, even though Cessilia now knew Bastat was the oldest of the candidates, and a year older than the King himself. In fact, she realized Bastat could have made a fine queen herself if she had come from the right background. She was very insightful, knowledgeable, and tactful. However, she wasn't the right match, and they both knew it.

The way she looked at Cessilia meant she was well aware that the Princess was a better candidate than she was.

“My father allowed me to be the judge of the Princess' character, so I will say this now. I believe our Kingdom needs someone powerful, someone who will genuinely care for each tribe, and someone who will try to heal our nation from the inside without ignoring any wound. Counselor Yassim isn't called the Wise for nothing. The fact that he brought you, the daughter of a legendary healer and a godly warrior, means a lot to many people, Princess Cessilia.”

“...I und-derstand.” Cessilia simply nodded, her throat a bit tight.

Although she hadn't expected so much hostility when coming here, she also hadn't expected to see people sincerely rooting for her to become Queen.

“I have only gotten a small glimpse of you, so it might be too soon to entirely put my support behind you,” said Bastat,

“but please know you will have nothing to fear from my clan. We will simply be watching.”

Cessilia understood Bastat's words easily. She was still a foreigner and had merely been here for a few days. Even if she was aware of all the eyes on her, it was too soon for the tribes to really support her. Perhaps she had made an impression at the first banquet, but she would have to prove herself even more in the upcoming days. However, it was understandable that the

smaller tribes with lower chances of seeing their candidate become Queen would naturally turn to someone who had the power but no tribe supporting her, rather than the candidates from hostile opponents. Cessilia had thought she would have nine rivals, but perhaps it didn't need to be so. Aside from the girls of the Yekara and Pangoja Clans, no other candidates had been openly hostile to her. Perhaps the remaining candidates were also considering this competition very differently as well. Perhaps there were even more eyes watching her than she had realized...

"You mentioned the King wasn't letting the Yekara Clan free the occupied cities anymore," she said,

frowning. "Then, is he doing it alone?"

"He is," nodded Bastat. "That is also why many respect him, or fear him like one would a real god. The King didn't

only establish himself because he took the throne by force, but because he managed to remain there without any clan's help, and restored peace at an unprecedented pace all on his own."

"What about the Royal Guards?"

"He had defeated the ones his father had previously, so when the White King rose, there was almost none to support him. The Yekara Clan helped him defeat the previous Royal Guards, but there wasn't many left to switch to his side. It took a couple of years before we even got enough new recruits to protect at least the Inner Capital."

Cessilia was rendered speechless.

She meant Ashen had reconquered his Kingdom almost... on his own? It seemed unthinkable, and yet, it would have explained why all his people worshiped him like a god. He was their War God, the one who had single-handedly saved the decaying Eastern Kingdom. If she put together everything the Counselors, Nana, and Bastat had told her, their country was an absolute wreck for the past two decades. The one King who had first tried to restore some peace had turned out to be a tyrant himself, and the most barbaric tribes had fueled the years of civil wars in between.

What she had seen so far reflected very little of that. Although she had witnessed the dangers in the Outer Capital and

the ravaged landscape, the Capital still seemed to be thriving. The Inner Capital was completely secure, and the economy was

given a new breath, enough for the locals to try and grow more activities, trades, and businesses. All this in the span of just

five years... Cessilia had always felt something was off about the way people treated Ashen, but now, she knew why. His

legend wasn't just a tale he had simply fabricated. It had been forged by his actions, and the miracles he had conceived.

Miracles she didn't believe in.

“...Lady B-Bastat,” she suddenly asked, turning to Bastat with a resolute look, “d-do you kn-know which cities were freed r-recently?”

“I do not,” Bastat shook her head.

“I know!” Nana suddenly raised her hand, popping up before them. “Sab and some of his friends were chatting about it last week. But why?”

“I want t-to g-go.”

“Are you sure?” Nana frowned. “It’s a bit far, and probably not very nice to visit...” Cessilia smiled at her and turned to Bastat.

“Th-thank you very m-much for the visit t-today. I will c-come to the market a-again, another t-time.”

“You will be welcome anytime, Princess Cessilia,” Bastat nodded politely. “I will have some art pieces delivered to you later if that is alright with you.”

“Th-thank you. Nana, let’s g-go.”

“Alright... Bye, Lady Bastat, thank you for the invite!”

They quietly left the market, Bastat waving as they exited the little alleys of the market. However, Naptunie frowned and got closer to Cessilia.

“It’s not that I don’t want to go, but... why are we going there? It’s really not a good place to go, even if the King freed that city. The cities usually take a while to get back on their feet and for people to go back there to open trades. If they liberated it last week, it’s probably still very, uh... unsightly.”

“I kn-know. Th-that’s why I want t-to go now.”

Naptunie was a bit confused, but she still decided to follow Cessilia quietly, without further discussion. Whatever the Princess did, she was always curious to hear and see. It was more interesting than any of her books.

“So... do you want us to rent horses? If we take really fast horses, maybe we can get there tomorrow morning, but it’s still going to be a dangerous journey... I can ask Sabael to come, but it might not be enough! I know Lady Tessa can fight really, really well, but...”

“D-don’t worry, Nana,” chuckled Cessilia. “I have th-the ride and s-security already c-covered.”

Nana frowned for a second, and then she slowly understood, her eyes opening wide and her heart beating a bit faster.

She opened and closed her mouth several times, unable to formulate her thoughts. She walked a bit quicker next to Cessilia, only to realize they were going to the Royal Guards’ training grounds, probably to get Tessandra. Perhaps they were picking her and Sabael up before going to rent horses? However, Cessilia had definitely said the ride was covered... Nana tried hard to

contain her excitement, but she was practically jumping when they arrived at the training grounds, not even daring to ask the question that was burning on her lips, which was quite a first.

"T-Tessa!" Cessilia called once they got there.

In the middle of a training field, her cousin was shining. With two short, wooden sticks in her hands, she was defeating

her four opponents with incredible ease. When her cousin's voice got to her, she turned her head at the same moment she

blocked an attack coming from the opposite side, as if her arm was operating by itself.

Then, she turned around, and as if she

had been resting until then, she quickly ended the fight about one minute later. She was sweating a bit, but compared to the

young men with their bodies and egos on the ground, she was fine. She quickly walked up to Cessilia and Nana, Sabael

appearing behind her with a faint frown, and a bruise forming next to his chin.

"Cessi, Nana! Are you guys back already? How was it?" Tessa asked, a large smile on.

"How come you're back already?"

"We need t-to go somewhere," Cessi said. "N-now."

"Got it. Are you coming, handsome?"

"I told you to stop calling me that..." Sabael blushed. "Where are you girls going?"

"To the Muram Village," said Nana.

"What? Why would you go there!"

"We won't b-be long," promised Cessilia. "We will be back before dusk."

Next to her, Nana's eyes sparkled with joy, but her brother had a different opinion.

"Wha-No way, you're going to take my sister on the... the..."

"Dragon," chuckled Tessa. "Come on, babe, you can say it."

"Don't call me that either! I'm sorry, but I can't agree to that. Nana is only sixteen, she's not going to—"

"I am not waiting for your permission!" his sister exclaimed. "Don't come if you don't want to, but I'm going to ride on

Sir Dragon, and you're an idiot if you don't come with us too!"

"Nana!"

"There's enough room for four," added Tessa with a little wink, putting an arm around

Nana's shoulders. "Alright, let's

go, ladies! Come on, Nana, let's go buy some beignets for the big boy before we go, he'll be happy to have a snack for the

road... and I'm hungry too."

Cessilia chuckled but turned around to follow Tessandra and Nana, leaving poor Sabael behind. After they had taken a

few steps away, they heard an exasperated sigh behind them and steps catching up to them.

"By all the gods, you dragon girls are impossible!"

Again, they borrowed the Dorosef Tribe's passes to get out of the Capital and find a deserted area to call out to Krai.

This time, Nana was much more enthusiastic than before about leaving the safe area, probably more convinced about both Tessa's skills and having Krai as a bodyguard. The reluctant one was her brother. Although it was obvious he would come with them regardless, he kept protesting as they moved away from the crowded streets and past the two walls, leaving plenty of time for him to banter with Tessandra along the way. Cessilia suspected her cousin was loving those arguments with Sabael, so she and Nana didn't really take part in them.

Soon enough, they found themselves in a deserted enough area, and Cessilia called out to the large Black Dragon.

"Couldn't Sir Dragon have come to get us near the castle?" Nana asked, her eyes on the sky.

"I d-don't want t-too many p-people to b-be aware of his p-presence," Cessilia shook her head. "It's b-better if he is left alone, I am a b-bit worried that others will t-try to hunt him d-down."

"I'm sure Sir Dragon would be fine!" Nana exclaimed.

"Oh, he would," scoffed Tessa. "We would be more worried about the hunters..."

Nana grimaced, understanding their point. Despite this, she was a bit excited and nervous to be able to climb on the big

dark dragon. She was almost on her toes and trying to glance all around when the dark spot finally appeared in the sky, coming

from farther north. Krai let out a loud growl before landing right in front of them, its large wings throwing gusts of wind on all

sides. The Black Dragon looked a bit excited and leaned its head toward Cessilia, who patted the large snout.

"Hi," she said with a smile. "I'll c-climb up first. Nana, you come after me."

"Really?" Nana gasped, smiling from ear to ear.

"Your little sister is less scared than you," said Tessandra, teasing Sabael with a little elbow push.

"I'm not scared! It's just... concern."

"Sure..."

Tessandra helped Nana climb up before doing so herself and offered her hand for Sabael to get on. The young man

sighed and rolled his eyes once before eventually sitting behind her.

"You'd better hang on," Tessandra warned him with a mischievous smile.

"Uh... to what...?"

"To me!" she exclaimed, frustrated. "Oh, come on, if you can handle a sword, you can grab my waist..."

Sabael turned red, his eyes going down to Tessandra's waist. Of course, she happened to be wearing a mere piece of

fabric around her chest, meaning a lot of skin was exposed below that... He sighed but finally wrapped his arms around her,

trying to look elsewhere.

"Finally," Tessandra smiled.

"N-Nana, you hang on t-too. C-come on, K-Krai, let's g-go."

The dragon jumped up in the sky effortlessly, despite the four humans it carried. Nana gasped, letting out something between a squeak and a cry, but in a matter of seconds, and despite the fear, she found herself mesmerized by the view below.

The Capital was growing tinier each second, while the large, flapping wings were taking them high, fast. The dragon was climbing up, and even Sabael had to hang on tighter to Tessandra, much to her satisfaction.

Thankfully for Sabael, Krai quickly found a nice pace at which to fly. The dragon could float a bit with its wings spread wide open, and at this height, it was incredibly easy for them to get away from the Capital. Quickly, Nana had to point at the place they were headed to, almost like she would have pointed it out on a map. Still, she enjoyed each second of the flight. She had never seen her country like this, nor imagined the sensations flying could give them. It was scary but thrilling. However, because it was her home country she could observe from up there, it was also saddening to see all the ruined, burnt, deserted lands.

“Two of my uncles and our grandfather died in the civil wars,” she whispered to Cessi with a sad voice. “It was really hard, for a while. I was scared every day that people would ransack our house next... My dad said we survived because we were able to stay together and protect our boats, but we knew what was happening everywhere else. It was worse when the army came back defeated from the border. People don’t like to say it, but many of the people who became mercenaries were soldiers before that. After they lost the war, there was no money to pay them, and they didn’t want to return to their families empty-handed. It became really horrible... Even those who returned to their villages ended up having to fight to defend them...”

Cessilia felt her pain as well. She had accompanied her father on battlefields, and her mother in hospitals. She knew how to recognize traces of war and devastation...

When Krai finally landed them in front of the Muram Village, a terrible smell of burnt flesh greeted them. Nana grimaced and covered her nose, hiding behind Cessilia, a bit afraid once again. They all got down from the Black Dragon, which growled, also unhappy about this place. Krai wasn’t the only one. This village didn’t look like it had been freed, it looked like a cemetery. There were only a few people who ran to hide upon the dragon’s arrival. Cessilia gestured for Krai to stay behind, the dragon lying down, and she stepped forward first, the others following right behind her.

“This place is... hell,” grimaced Tessandra, visibly just as disgusted.

The smell was coming from the large pile of bodies on the side. Most of it had been turned to charcoal black, but there was just so much that it wouldn't go away for a few more days. Cessilia couldn't bear to look at the calcined human remains.

They had been gathered a bit away from what was left of the Muram Village. It was really just a village like any other. A handful of roads came to a group of modest houses, and there were only two shops, both closed. In fact, all buildings bore traces of damage of some sort. Some had holes in the walls, others their door ripped off, and one even seemed to have completely collapsed from the inside. Those weren't new, however. A lot of the damage had clearly been done over a few years. Only the large red stains on the walls and ground seemed to be fairly new... Cessilia kept looking around the streets, ignoring all the stares she could feel on her from behind the closed doors and drawn curtains.

"Some of the Royal Guards came here just a few days ago with the King," said Sabael, "to help gather the bodies, and try to help with the damages, but... many villagers don't trust soldiers anymore, since what happened with the previous King.

They were asked to leave by the remaining locals."

Tessandra crouched down, her eyes on the ground. She was scrutinizing all the footprints left on the soil, and behind her, Cessilia was standing but staring at them too.

"How many soldiers came to fight?" Tessandra asked.

"I'm not sure... Maybe about twenty or thirty?" Sabael shrugged. "...Why?"

"It d-doesn't look like th-there was much of a f-fight," Cessilia said.

Even if the battle had ended a week ago, there weren't many people there, and the houses were rather far from one another since this place was meant for farming. From her experience, there should have been much more traces of the fight than this.

"His Majesty arrived first and did most of the work," explained Sabael. "His abilities are... godly. When the Royal

Soldiers arrive, there usually isn't much more to do about the pillagers. We come to pacify the people, help with the damage, and make sure the place will remain peaceful..."

"Peaceful, it is," scoffed Tessandra.

Indeed, there was a terrible silence reigning. A silence of death.

Cessilia's eyes turned to the houses. Most of them had found people to come back and live in them. These lands were obviously meant to be farmed, but it would take months before people could do anything with them again... The soil hadn't been cultivated for far too long, and all the animals had fled. The only well was probably dry too. She sighed, a bit depressed.

The aftermath of a battle never had a taste of victory...

“What now, Cessi? What did we come here for?”

“I want to know how the K-King did it,” she said.

She turned around and began walking to the pile of bodies. Her eyes were going to the damaged walls, analyzing

everything she saw. She knew the survivors would probably not talk to a foreign woman who had just landed on a dragon’s

back, and she couldn’t blame them for being terrified. They were probably terrorized already...

Behind her, Nana was following like a shadow. From a dream-like flight, her mood had sunk with the heavy atmosphere

in this place, and she didn’t really dare leave the Princess’ side. She was also curious to understand why Cessilia had wanted

to come here. Meanwhile, Tessandra stayed behind, observing the traces of the fight.

Between the two, Sabael, visibly lost, crossed his arms.

“I told you, the King came first!”

Seeing that Cessilia didn’t seem to listen, he ran to catch up to her.

“I’ve seen him in action,” he continued. “The King has unbelievable fighting skills, the best in our entire Kingdom, and

he’s as fast as lightning! Behind him, all soldiers become braver just from seeing him in action. We all dream to achieve a tenth

of his talent one day. His white hair is proof he is out of this world, and his combat skills too. It’s inhuman. I really believe his

sword is blessed by the gods of war!”

“Your K-King only had one God of War training him,” retorted Cessilia, sounding pissed, “and he did not teach him

this.”

She stopped in front of the pile of bodies, a dejected expression on her face.

Somewhere behind her, Nana hadn’t

followed her all the way and was covering her nose with her sleeve, looking like she was going to be sick. Sabael only dared

to go a couple of steps farther than his sister, but before he added anything, Cessilia’s hand suddenly grabbed a limb from one

of the bodies and pulled it to take it out of the pile.

He gasped in shock, not only because of the visual of the burnt bodies falling down one after another but because she

had fearlessly grabbed a still-smoking corpse. So much of the flesh was already burnt that it looked like Cessilia had dragged a

skeleton away from the pile in front of the siblings’ shocked eyes. Her dark reptilian hand was protecting her from the heat, but

there was nothing to prevent the smell. Naptunie coughed a bit but didn’t dare try to get closer. Tessandra was the one to join

her cousin, glaring at the body beneath them.

“This guy was killed in one blow,” she said, tilting her head. “The way his neck bones are still bent means the sword

was stopped halfway, probably by some armor. A grown adult, I’d say...”

Cessilia seemed to be scrutinizing the body from even closer. She didn't shy away from getting down on her knees next to it or manipulating it, although she was visibly being as respectful as possible. She used her scaled hand to check the body's mouth and its head, although there wasn't much left but a few holes and the vague shape of a skull.

"He was drugged," she whispered.

"What?"

"His t-tongue and gums b-burned faster than th-they should have, c-compared to the rest of his b-body. There was something that accelerated the p-process in his mouth."

"...Alcohol?"

"He d-doesn't smell like alcohol."

Tessa leaned over, and despite grimacing, took a whiff of the body, before nodding.

"You're right... Alcohol would still leave a smell, I can even smell some of his sweat."

"What kind of nose have you got?!" exclaimed Sabael, stunned.

"A dragon's," the girls answered simultaneously.

Somewhere behind them, Krai let out a short growl, as if to concur. Sabael was speechless. The Princess could tell the person was drugged simply after observing their burnt body? Before he could even ask anything, she and Tessandra began pulling two more bodies out and observing them the same way. The two cousins were quickly drawing conclusions between themselves, agreeing those people had been killed way too swiftly.

"Someone drugged these people before they fought," mumbled Tessandra. "That guy looked like he had plenty of muscle, but he was killed with one blow... They probably all were! There are, what, fifty bodies here?"

"Sixty-six, my lady."

They turned around.

A very old woman, who only stood with the help of a cane, had come out of one of the houses to talk to them. She was wearing a bandage with blood on it over her small head and looked like she had been through hell. As if her body moved automatically, Cessilia walked up to her, gently pulling the bandage to see the wound beneath.

"I c-can treat this," she offered.

"I am fine, young lady," the old woman shook her head, "but thank you. I'm at the age where I don't care about these little things anymore. I heard you ladies from my house, the one over there. You were right. All these men were drugged before His Majesty arrived. We did it."

"What the heck?" Tessandra frowned. "Why?"

"To help His Majesty!" exclaimed the old lady. "This village was my ancestors' home long before those bandits came

here. I had to watch again and again as they robbed, killed, and raped every single person I have known. They killed my sons who tried to save me, and they raped my daughter-in-law and grandchild before murdering them! Each time more men came here, it wasn't to save us, it was more bandits coming to take whatever was left!" The old lady looked exhausted just from saying all that. In fact, she seemed to be out of energy overall. She was old, injured, and clearly very upset too. Her wrinkled hand was shaking on her cane, and tears were appearing in her small eyes. Cessilia felt her own throat tighten listening to all this. She could imagine that pain was the pain of each person hiding inside the houses. No wonder they had been terrified of them and their dragon now... "Granny, I'm so sorry..." Nana cried, upset as well. "I can't take any more pity, young lady," said the old woman. "Those men got what they deserved! They weren't humans! I don't know what you came here for, but the King served justice for my family!" "Did you see the fight, old lady?" asked Tessandra, her hands on her hips. "...From behind my window," she nodded. "I would have helped, even!" "There were sixty-six bandits here?" "That's what I said!" "And you drugged them all to help the King?" The old lady suddenly seemed to calm down a bit, and averted her eyes, nodding. "We did. The few of us they kept alive to serve them, cook them meals... We simply drugged them, to help His Majesty." "How did you know the King was coming?" The old lady hesitated for a second, before shrugging. "We had heard he was on his way." "From whom? If the bandits had known, they should have been prepared better than stupidly eating and drinking homemade drugs by a bunch of villagers?" "Watch your tongue, foreigner!" exclaimed the elder. "You're the one not telling us the truth." "I'm not lying! We drugged them!" "Who p-provided you the d-drugs?" asked Cessilia, frowning too. "Who t-told you the King was c-coming?" "I told you, no one! We made it!" "You d-don't have the ingredients here t-to make such a p-potent and c-complicated drug," she retorted. "Someone had t-to c-come beforehand and t-tell you this p-plan. The K-King had an easy fight against th-those bandits b-because you helped him. I just want t-to know who helped you." The old woman seemed to hesitate, her eyes going to Nana behind them. Seeing she still wasn't talking, Naptunie took a deep breath and came forward.

“Granny, please? We are on His Majesty’s side too, we came from the Capital to understand what happened here. We will help you, I promise. ...I... I will ask my uncle to bring you some food, as soon as we can. Look! See? It’s a pass from my family, the Dorosef Tribe. We can help you, I promise.”

The old woman’s eyes lingered for a while on Naptunie’s papers, her lips pinched in a line. Then, she sighed.

“That woman... She asked us not to tell anyone about the drug, but since you already know... I don’t know more, anyway. She just snuck into the village the night before the King arrived, and gave us a huge bag that smelled like herbal medicine, asking us to put it in their food.”

“A woman?” Tessa frowned.

“Yes. She had strangely pale skin just like yours, and red hair too.”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a look. The latter sighed.

“Oh well, that explains a couple of things... although it makes me mad too.”

“Why all the questions, what are you here for?!” the older woman exclaimed, frowning.

“With that dragon, I thought you had come to attack us!”

“Why would we attack here, there’s literally nothing left we’d possibly want to steal...”

“Tessa!”

“My thoughts too!” scoffed the granny, not offended.

“We only c-came b-because we heard what ha-happened here,” sighed Cessilia. “...I am a healer. Are you sure you ddon’t want me t-to look at your wounds?”

“Oh, if that’s the case... There are a few more who need it more than me. The soldiers did their best, but those brave boys aren’t cut out to heal anything... If that’s alright with you, I’ll go back to the others now and explain to them. We’ll see if they want to be healed by a foreigner or not...”

“Th-thank you.” Cessilia nodded.

The old lady slowly went back, and Cessilia let out a long sigh, crossing her arms. Tessandra walked up to her, a sullen look also.

“What are you thinking? Are you mad that... the King had help?”

“...I don’t know.”

Cessilia was conflicted. Her eyes kept going back to the pile of bodies. Even though she now knew who they were and what they had done, she still felt something was terribly wrong about all of this. She didn’t like the idea that Jisel had cheated the battle in Ashen’s favor, either, but she knew this had probably spared him, and a lot of the soldiers, some wounds and effort. Perhaps it had even saved lives.

“This is too horrible,” muttered Naptunie, still upset. “To think those people were still under those bandits’ tyranny all this time! It makes me sick just thinking about what that granny had to go through...”

“Don’t think too much,” sighed Tessandra. “You getting sick won’t help them. Can your tribe really provide food here?”

“We can,” nodded Sabael. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Great. But I doubt the Dorosef can feed all the other villages in the same situation...” Cessilia felt the same. Even if the Dorosef provided some help, it would be temporary, not a long-term solution. She looked around. They had to help those people so they would get back on their feet by themselves.

First, as she had promised, Cessilia spent time looking at the wounds of the people the old woman brought forward to

meet her. They were clearly lacking the proper medicine and supplies, so they had to make do with what they had, as well as

explain to them how to tend to the most basic wounds, sterilize things, and create their own supplies. Not only her, but

Tessandra, who had also learned some rudimentary medicine, helped too. There weren’t many people left to tend to, but they

did their best. Even Naptunie was happy to run errands, distribute some snacks she had gotten earlier that day from her aunt,

and learn what she could from Cessilia. It was clear her thirst for knowledge knew no bounds, and she even quickly got over

her disgust of blood and exposed flesh to help out. Meanwhile, Sabael was recruited to help repair the damages, unplug the

well, and gather what materials could still be useful. It was cute to see him run around, eager to help and eager to get out of a

certain lady’s line of sight...

For a while, their little group stayed in the Muram Village, helping in every way they could. When she was done

healing those who could use her help inside the houses, Cessilia took a walk around the village, showing the women which

wild plants could be propagated and used for herbal medicine, or to make tea to warm everyone up. Some women were

already knowledgeable, so it was a quick tour, and soon, it became clear she had done all she could. She sighed, the women

going back to prepare a larger pot of tea for everyone.

Next to her, Nana stepped forward to hand her a little cup of water.

“You’re so talented,” she muttered. “I understand better what they said about your mother being a legendary healer...”

“My m-mom remembered the t-teaching of her ancestors and t-taught me and my siblings t-too. B-but it won’t be enough

t-to help this village. We can heal th-their wounds, b-but th-they will need more food soon.”

“They should make a trip to the Capital!” exclaimed Nana. “Nowadays, they are trying to encourage the growth of more

crops, like before... I can even ask one of my uncles who trades outside to come all the way here. If their lands can be farmed

again, I’m sure they just need to buy new crops to start anew.”

"That would be nice, young lady," said the old woman, appearing at their side.

"However, our lands have been ravaged. We wouldn't even know where to begin, between all the blood that has been spilled, and the soil that has to be dug...

It will take us weeks until we can be ready to farm anything again!"

"Th-that, we c-can help with." Cessilia smiled.

To their surprise, she walked out, and Tessandra, who was smiling as well, obviously knew exactly what her cousin

was going for because she followed right after her. Cessilia walked away for a bit, leaving the line of houses to get to the

lands. As the old lady had said, there was no ground to cultivate from... yet.

"K-Krai!" she called out. "Nana, d-do you still have s-some f-food with you?"

"I have a few more snacks, yes... Why?"

"C-can I have it?"

"Oh, is it for Sir Dragon? Of course!"

Cessilia took the little snacks, which were small and sweet versions of the beignets.

Then, she walked up to the

ravaged field, and dug as deep as she possibly could, with her hands, and buried one, before covering it back with the soil. She

walked away, and did that again, until all six of the little snacks were hidden underground, around the same time Krai arrived,

tilting its head.

"...I don't understand," Nana whispered to Tessa. "She isn't expecting them to grow, right?"

"You should step back, Nana," Tessa chuckled. "It's going to get a bit messy around here."

Naptunie frowned, but carefully took a few steps back along with Tessandra, noticing Cessilia was doing the same now, walking up to them with a little smile.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. In front of them, Krai had begun walking around the area, and sniffing the ground,

deeply interested. She was shocked. The dragon could sniff the treats when Cessilia had buried them so deep? Yet, to her

surprise, it suddenly began digging into the ground. It was so violent, Nana jumped back a little. With its tail wagging in the air,

Krai's sharp claws violently ripped full wagon loads of soil out of the way. Such a large dragon was digging to get such a tiny

snack! Naptunie was in awe. It was a bit funny, and also a bit scary. Quickly, Krai found the first of the snacks, and ate it right

away, before sniffing the ground again to find the next one.

That wasn't all. As the dragon dug out the second and third treats, Naptunie realized Cessilia hadn't placed them in

random spots. In fact, she had calculated how deep she should bury them, how much soil Krai would be able to dig out, and

even from which direction the dragon would dig it, making sure they crossed paths.

What she had thought to be some random

digging game was now turning into a large-scale plan to completely labor the land, and it was unfolding in front of her eyes, in a matter of minutes!

"This is amazing!" exclaimed Naptunie.

"I c-created this t-technique with my b-brothers w-when I was young," chuckled Cessilia.

"Mother wanted to c-create

new fields in the n-north, b-but we had to d-dig deep and it was really t-tiring for my older b-brothers and the workers. I

noticed th-the d-dragons love to d-dig for treats, so I made several at-attempts to have them d-dig as a game. B-but we c-could

only b-bring one d-dragon at a t-time or they ended up f-fighting and making a b-big mess... In th-the end, we hid a b-bunch in

the lands, and it worked so well, we p-prepared large fields for farming..."

"So that's how you came up with that technique?" laughed Tessandra. "No wonder the north became so prolific in just a

few years, with dragons to do the work!"

"Th-they had fun d-doing it!" protested Cessilia.

Even without her saying it, it was obvious. Krai was happily digging, making little mountains and deep trenches of soil

all around, which meant a large area was already plowed. All the villagers who had been brave enough to come and observe

were speechless. Cessilia turned to the older lady when the dragon was looking for its last treat.

"K-Krai d-did a lot, b-but you will still have t-to work to b-bring this place b-back to what it was. It r-rains a lot in the

area, so you c-can p-prepare to farm again and organize th-this land as you want. Many villages are p-probably in the same

situation as yours, so you c-could try growing many d-different kinds of crops, and later b-become a reference for th-them. P-prepare

a lot more food for th-the nearby v-villages who will t-take longer t-to get b-back on t-their feet. You c-can establish

this village as a future p-point of trade."

For a few seconds, the old woman seemed a bit lost, and Cessi wondered if she should explain again. Yet, to her

surprise, the older woman took a deep breath and bowed. Behind her, several villagers did the same, or even got on their

knees, all showing deep respect and gratitude toward the Princess. The whole area was silent, and Cessilia, shocked, took a

step back.

"N-no! P-please, it's not necessary..."

"Please let us thank you, my lady," said the old woman. "Without you, we would still be hiding in our houses in fright,

instead of thinking of the future. And thank you for using such a noble creature to help us prepare to farm again. I promise we

will work hard, and do our best from now on. Thanks to His Majesty and you, it feels like this Kingdom might still face a new

dawn after all we have endured! I hope I'll live long enough to see it!"

Cessilia felt horribly embarrassed, but when she glanced to the side, both Tessandra and Nana were smiling at her, clearly happy with this resolution too.

"Y-you're welcome..." she muttered.

"Alright," said Tessa. "Cessi, it's starting to get late, and I see more of those dark clouds from earlier. We should go

back now if we don't want to get caught in another storm..."

Quickly, they bid goodbye to the old lady and all the villagers they had met. Naptunie once again promised to send them

food from the Dorosef Tribe, and the Muram Village thanked her too, as well as Tessa and Sabael, for their help.

Cessilia had an odd feeling when Krai took off from the ground. She was glad they had been able to help this village,

but their situation was probably the same as many others... Who would be able to help them all? This was an issue of a

Kingdom-wide scale. Some weren't even freed of the bandits yet. She couldn't imagine what those people had gone through,

but she could see a glimpse of it in their eyes. Hell, surely...

Just like Tessa had predicted, the rain began to fall on their way back. Krai tried to fly quickly, not fond of that weather,

either, but the Black Dragon couldn't spare them from the downpour. They were all a bit relieved when they finally landed on

the outskirts of the Outer Capital, as the wind at least wasn't as terrible down there.

"Bye-bye, Sir Dragon!" Nana tried to wave her hand.

Krai left them quickly, and Sabael suggested they rent horses to get back faster, which they agreed to. With Naptunie

riding behind Cessilia, they all departed quickly, hoping to reach the bridge soon.

However, to their surprise, they were

stopped by the Royal Guards, who refused to let them in.

"Are you kidding?" roared Sabael. "These passes are perfectly fine! Which division do you belong to?!"

"They are not," retorted the guard calmly, his eyes going to Cessilia.

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a look. There was no problem with their papers.

Those guards were only set on not

letting them through. While Sabael was bent on arguing with them, Tessa sighed and pulled his horse's bridle.

"Stop it, Sab. Let's just try one of the other entries."

"We shouldn't have to! Our papers are fine!"

"I know they are, love, but that guy barely looked at them. He looked at us. Either he has something against foreigners,

or he was paid off. In any case, we aren't going back this way without causing a commotion. There are three other doors, right?

Let's just try the closest one..."

The Royal Guard grunted, but the girls had already decided to let this go. In fact, they were all drenched already, and

that only added to Sabael's frustration. They should have been getting back as soon as they could, but now they had to spend extra time under this downpour, in this unsecured area, and make an unnecessary detour. He was ashamed they had run into corrupt Royal Guards and internally swore he'd remember their faces for later... Luckily, the girls were calmer, and once they were on the way to the next bridge, no one mentioned what had happened.

Or perhaps the rain and wind blew their frustrations away too. However, it was still a long way there. They kept riding next to the first wall that protected the city, the rain pouring down on them.

Except for Nana, they all quickly realized they were being followed. At first, it was an uneasy feeling. Sabael had been

nervous since they were refused entrance into the Capital, but now, it was clear someone was chasing after them. They could

hear horses, and see their pursuers coming from adjacent streets. It made no sense that more horses would be riding under this

downpour to gather behind them unless they also couldn't get in at the previous door, which was unlikely. People who could

afford horses shouldn't have to ride from one gate to another.

"Cessi, keep going with Nana!" Tessandra shouted, taking out her sword.

Cessilia's horse accelerated, Nana holding on tightly behind her. Meanwhile, Tessandra slowed her horse until she and

Sabael were riding next to each other.

"There are a dozen of them... at least," she shouted to be heard. "Will you be alright?"

"I should ask you that!"

"You're cute!"

Sabael rolled his eyes and took out his own weapon. Of course, she would be fine... He was more worried for his little

sister. Naptunie had no fighting abilities, and he was pretty sure he had never seen the Princess use a weapon, either, which

explained why they weren't staying behind to fight as well. Tessandra was the fighter of the two.

The first attack came from the corner of a street, taking them by surprise. A man stepped out at the last second, with a

long sword. His target was Tessandra's horse, and the young woman moved quickly to save her leg from being cut too,

knowing it was too late to save her mount. The horse was brutally stopped in its run by a large blade slicing its flank, and

Tessa jumped. Her body made a perfect arc in the air, and she fell down brutally on top of the man, her blade going right for his heart.

"Cessi, don't stop!" she shouted.

Cessilia nodded and had her horse speed up. While her cousin's horse rode farther away, she already had two more

men going right for her. Bandits, by their looks. However, their weapons were new, and she was clearly their target. Those men

had been paid off. Tessandra frowned and raised her sword, attacking first. She was strong, and those men were not a problem for her. What was more annoying was the slippery ground, the fact they were still outside of the Capital, and she had no idea how many more enemies were targeting them. She couldn't stay here.

"Tessa!"

She raised her head, and to her surprise, Sabael, whom she thought to have been gone already, was coming back to her, riding his horse and holding his hand out to get her. Tessandra smiled and got ready to grab his hand. He rode past her, and in a perfect movement, she used his strength to swing and land behind him. As soon as she was seated behind him, she put a quick kiss on his cheek.

"You came back for me?" she asked with a smile.

"Not now, Tessa!"

"You so came back for me," she smiled, hugging him from behind with a satisfied expression.

Sabael rolled his eyes, but as he was seated in front, Tessa couldn't see that he was smiling as well... He pulled the reins and had his horse turn around to try and catch up to the others. Who knew how many more attackers were waiting for them between there and the next gate? They had to find a way back into the Capital, and quickly.