

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 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 b-banquet.”

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...”