

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 candlelights 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 l-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.”