

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 pale-skinned, 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 dashingly 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 p-playing 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.