

## Chapter 9

The reason Cessilia hadn't resisted the pull was simply out of sheer surprise and confusion. The room had been in the dark just before, and she had barely realized what was going on nor where she was being dragged to. It only took a matter of seconds too. Opening a door on the side of the room, Ashen pulled her with him onto the balcony circling the banquet hall. They were on one of the high towers of the castle, and aside from the main doors the guests had come in and out from, and the small door behind the throne, all the other doors on the side led to that very balcony.

It wasn't the best weather to be outside in. The storm was loud above them, and the clouds dark. A rainfall had begun, landing big droplets on them and threatening to inundate the little balcony in seconds if it wasn't for the draining system.

Cessilia didn't care much about the tempestuous weather, though; the cause of her distress was the man who had dragged her there. She glared at him the second she realized it was Ashen. When he felt they were far enough from the door, both of them barely protected against the stone wall, Ashen turned around to face her.

Cessilia suddenly turned her wrist and broke herself free in one movement, taking him by surprise. It was one brutal, quick gesture that showed her annoyance at him, but Ashen didn't protest, only pulling his hand back with a sullen expression.

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

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

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

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

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

“Cessilia, I... I know I’ve treated you too harshly. I was so confused after I had thought I’d never see you again. I directed my anger at you, and I shouldn’t have. I’ve thought about this often. I knew it would have been reckless to bring you to war with me. Those two years were the best of my life, and brutally, your father rejected me and chased me away, back into my own Kingdom still torn apart by civil war. I was barely seventeen, and I had just gotten back on my feet! ...Can you even understand how painful that was for me? I was scared, confused, and angry. I felt like I was given hope, only to have it all crushed again. I considered your family my own, and you all welcomed me so warmly too! I never wanted to leave, Cessilia. I would have never wanted to leave, but your father didn’t even give me that choice.”

Anger appeared in his expression again, and he glared at the wall behind her, clenching his fists at the memory. He was shaking, not because of the cold but because of how painful that memory was. The feelings of that time were all coming back, too hard to endure. Ashen made sure not to direct his ice-cold gaze at Cessilia, but even so, the Princess wasn't looking at him. She seemed to be hearing him while trying not to listen and refused to move or look his way. They were standing less than two steps away from one another; they were too close for her not to hear him. His large body was partially shielding her from the rain that had intensified, and the wind that was whipping his skin. Ashen's white hair was floating around his face, while Cessilia's curls were still down, barely moving as no breeze reached her. She was both shielded and cornered.

Ashen scoffed bitterly.

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

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

Just then, Ashen sighed, and in a swift movement, undid his fur cape to place it on her shoulders. Cessilia tried to take it off, but as soon as her hand grabbed it over her shoulder, Ashen's fingers caught it. This time,

she glared back at him, not avoiding his dark eyes anymore. The King didn't seem to mind at all. His eyes were on her, and he resumed talking, strangely calm for once.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I... I swear I'm not mad at you. I knew there was no way you'd come, but I still waited. I waited for days, hoping to see you, and at the same time, a part of me didn't want you to meet me there. I knew you'd be too young to follow me to my Kingdom when you had only known the peace of your family's Empire. So I left. I left, with my anger and my rancor,

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

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

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

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

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

It wouldn't have been so hard to endure if she hadn't looked so beautiful in that instant. She was like a goddess under the rain and storm, not fearing him, not allowing him anything. She seemed so fragile and so small in front of him, yet he knew he had already lost to her. He couldn't win, not when he loved her so much, so painfully. Not when she had that cold mix of anger and resentment in her eyes. Not when he was the one who had broken that bridge she had desperately tried to build between them, after all this time. It was his fault.

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

She backed against the wall, and a faint dash of pink appeared on her cheeks. She was suddenly desperate to avoid his gaze, but she couldn't

hide her reactions well. There was still something between them, something that made them warm despite the cold and driving rain.

“Cessi, I’m really sorry.”

Her lower lip twitched, and for a second, with all those drops running down her face, it looked as if she was crying. Perhaps she really was, but it was hard to tell. Ashen took a deep breath and leaned down to kiss her.

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

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

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

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

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

“Cessilia!”

“D-don’t ever d-do th-that again,” she painfully muttered with a hoarse voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’ll t-talk when you’re d-done feeling sorry j-just for yourself.”

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

“Your scales.”

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

“...They weren’t black before. Cece’s scales weren’t dark. ...Cessilia, what happened to your dragon?”

He saw her shoulders quickly rise from her breathing, but it might have been due to the storm and the wind blowing against her body. She was

hesitating, but before Cessilia could answer, the door she was trying to get to slowly opened.

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

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

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

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

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

For a few seconds, she couldn't speak, completely disoriented. Her head felt a bit dizzy, and she just shook it, her voice too tight to speak. During that time, Yassim's eye fell on the fur cloak on her shoulders, and he glanced toward the throne, where the King was also coming back to his seat. Just like the Princess, he was drenched and sat quietly with a sullen expression.

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

"No."

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

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

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



“Yes. N-now.”

Yassim and Tessa exchanged a look, but they could tell the Princess was set on her decision. Not only that, but she was wearing the King’s fur cape he had on previously, and they could roughly guess something had happened between the two. Despite the entertainment provided by another one of the candidates in the middle of the room, it was clear the King’s absence hadn’t gone unnoticed, and now, more glances were going their way, trying to make sense out of the drenched Princess’ short absence. Some were whispering and not even trying to conceal their suspicious stares, even when Tessa glared back. Perhaps it was indeed better for her cousin to take a stance now.

“...Fine,” muttered Tessa. “I was getting bored of this shitshow anyway. We might as well provide the entertainment ourselves...”

Above them, the sounds of thunder got louder, and a few worried glances went to the windows, the rain pelting against the glass. The storm was getting worse outside, and some servants quietly went to check the doors to the balcony, the same ones Cessilia had just come back from, to make sure they would hold. It was clear no one could go outside now.

Nobody in the room would have considered it anyway. Instead, they were all absorbed in the foreigner’s strange appearance, and the way her body slowly moved toward the center of the banquet hall. Despite being drenched, Cessilia had lost none of her beauty, and if anything, the droplets running down her dress made it even shinier. The fur cloak she had kept on was also gathering some attention, with some people glancing the King’s way before going back to her.

Cessilia wasn’t looking at any of them, though. Instead, she had her eyes on the floor, as if she deliberately avoided staring at anyone, and kept walking until she found herself in the center of the room. Only then did she finally raise her head to glance at the audience.

“Introducing Lady Cessilia, Imperial Princess of the Dragon Empire,” said Yassim’s voice behind her, loud enough for all to hear. “First daughter of the War God and Water Goddess.”

“...M-most of you already kn-know who I am,” said Cessilia.

“A stutterer!” shouted one of the candidates with a smirk.

Cessilia immediately glared back, her green eyes glowing with a fire this time. The woman who had spoken tried not to act scared, crossing her arms with a smirk on, but she still took a couple of steps back. She was the one who had performed just before, but Cessilia hadn't met this one yet. Perhaps she was related to one of the other girls. This was their first time seeing each other, so this woman had simply decided to insult her in the open, showing that Cessilia was not welcome there. She wasn't alone. Several chuckles and whispers were heard throughout the room, showing their unspoken support. However, this wasn't enough to intimidate Cessilia. Even Tessandra behind her smirked.

“...I d-do stutter,” Cessilia retorted, “b-but that's not all th-there is to know about-t me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cessilia immediately turned her head toward her.

"I have more p-power than you," Cessilia retorted, glaring back at that woman. "I am getting t-tired of you underestimating me b-because you d-don't know me. You th-think I am weak b-because I stutter. You th-think you're b-better because you c-can sing or d-dance. You think you c-can hurt me and scare me int-to going b-back."

Above their heads, the sky suddenly thundered as if to support her words. Many people turned their scared eyes toward the sky, but Cessilia and the candidate were still glaring at each other.

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

“You attacked the Dragon Empire,” scoffed Tessa. “You came looking for a fight, and against the Dragon Empire’s War God, no less. What, were you expecting to be sent home with gifts, perhaps?”

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

Cessilia’s eyes went beyond the candidate’s shoulder, glaring at Ashen. The King knew right away what she meant to say. He had mentioned the very same thing, just before. That with her father’s dragon, his war to claim back his Kingdom would have been over in a matter of days... Ironically, it was one of his own citizens that was speaking against that idea right now. Cessilia didn’t even have to do anything. She even faintly smiled, turning back to the brazen woman.

“...It’s t-true,” she said. “Th-things are easier when you have a d-dragon. Wars are easy t-to win. B-but some b-battles can’t be won on open g-ground, c-can they?”

Just as she said that, another loud noise from outside took the audience by surprise. This time, they weren’t so sure it was the thunder. Some strange noises were coming from all over the roof, sounds that didn’t seem to quite match the storm outside. Not only that, but after a few more seconds of sending worried glances all around, a few people noticed how some windows seemed now strangely shielded from the rain that was still pouring on others...

“I d-didn’t come here to p-play,” continued Cessilia, ignoring them. “I d-did not c-come to p-play p-petty games with other g-girls. I c-came here b-because this country needs a q-queen.”

“...You sound bloody arrogant to me,” hissed Safia this time, not far from the other candidate. “Aren’t you the one parading around with all that gold? What happened, Princess? Ready to buy our Kingdom with all of your daddy’s gold?”

“It must sound familiar to you,” Tessandra retorted, “and unlike yours, the gold we wear, we own ourselves! I guess working and earning your own money must still be quite a strange concept for a damn lazy b—”

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

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

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

“We are not scared of you!” Safia shouted back.

“You should b-be.”

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

Many people screamed in fear, others froze. This time, there was no doubt. That was no thunder, but the growl of a very, very large creature that moved on the roof around them. Safia and the other candidate looked terrified the most. Their eyes kept going around to see where the creature was, spotting movement behind the colored glass.

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

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

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

It wouldn’t be necessary, though. All eyes had gone from the Princess to the ceiling, most of them absolutely terrified. Although there had been word that a dragon had been spotted in the sky recently, Krai had indeed

remained out of most people's sights, and the few who had actually thought the information was real probably thought it had only come here to drop off the Princess, and gone home right away. They couldn't have been more wrong...

"You... You c-can't have a d-dragon here!" Safia screeched. "It will murder us all!"

"No," said Cessilia, very calmly. "Not unless I a-ask it t-to."

That was the most frightening sentence to hear.

All terrified eyes went to the Princess, suddenly realizing this woman yielded much more power than she looked to possess. Those who had found her beautiful now found her terrifying, and those who had found her pitiable with her stutter now found her imposing. They didn't have time to admire her any longer, though. From somewhere above, one of the windows suddenly burst open, shards of glass raining down on the banquet. Luckily, the few people nearby had time to run away before they were stabbed, and only the table below was covered in glass. Cessilia had done nothing to prevent this, which was clearly some form of warning as well as retaliation. With the window broken open, the wind blew inside the room, blowing out most of the candles. The room turned even darker than before, but there was one bright light nobody missed.

A bright red eye appeared at the window, glancing down at all the small humans in there.

"D-don't scream."

In fact, many people's cries died in their throats with Cessilia's warning. They wanted to scream in terror, try and run away, but now that she had said not to, everyone was scared of what would happen if they did, leaving many with their mouths open and a strange grimace stuck on their faces.

No one dared to move. Cessilia was the only one who slowly walked there. To many people's surprise, she kicked her heels off, and stepped fearlessly on the broken glass on the floor, and as her skirt floated around her legs, the black scales could be seen again, covering her feet more

safely than any pair of shoes. The Princess walked until she was under the window, and while glancing up at the dragon's large red eye, she smiled.

"G-give th-them to me now, p-please."

Another growl was heard, loud enough to have even the bravest people shiver in utter fear. Then, obeying her, the dragon moved up. Its body could be seen rubbing against the opening, the large black scales scrolling endlessly for several seconds. They could easily guess the size of that creature from the noises made all around the ceiling.

Finally, something that looked like a reptilian paw appeared, its sharp claws holding onto something. Krai threw it inside with one movement. The two things rolled on the floor, and in the darkness, it took the people a few seconds to realize.

"Bodies!" someone screamed.

"They are still alive," announced Tessandra, "...at least for now."

"Th-these are th-the men who ransacked our r-room," declared Cessilia, loudly. "Th-the only reason th-they are alive is b-because I k-know there was someone who c-commanded them to d-do it."

Indeed, the two men appeared to be breathing and still alive, but even then they were in a less-than-enviable state. Both were covered in blood, their clothes and bodies looking to have been deeply lacerated in multiple areas, most likely from the dragon's rough handling. The two men were unconscious, dirty, and looked poorly dressed. Even without more explanation, it was clear the only reason those bandits would have dared to commit a crime in the Royal Castle was under someone's orders. Many people exchanged glances, curious as to what she was going to do with those people.

"You... You have no proof, anyway," said Safia, her voice shaking. "Even if those people talk, you might have scared them to say any name!"

"...Thank you for the advice, Lady of... What was it, the Yekara Clan?" retorted Tessandra with a smirk.

Safia went white, as did many of the people who had been around her all this time. She was clearly regretting opening her mouth at this very moment. However, Cessilia's green eyes went to her without any anger in them; the Princess' calmness was dominating the room.

"I d-didn't p-plan to interrogate th-them," said Cessilia. "Th-this is a warning t-to their masters. You all wanted t-to see it, d-didn't you? My p-performance t-tonight is exactly th-this. I am a d-daughter of the D-Dragon Empire. Th-this is the last t-time you underestimate me. I will not let-t you g-get away with it next t-time."

Just as she finished her sentence, Tessandra moved forward and swung her sword twice. Swish, swish. The blade just shone once in the air before the blood flew. It splattered Safia's dress, and something landed at the candidate's feet. She screamed at the sight of the freshly cut hand.

"That one's for hurting our friend," said Tessandra. "Next time, I'm sending you their heads."

Safia's hysterical screams covered most of her words though. Tessandra shrugged, and cleaned her blade calmly, while the audience around them was still rendered utterly speechless. Everyone was now genuinely terrified of those two young women, almost more than they were of the dragon above their heads.

King Ashen was the only one to stare with excitement in his eyes. His fists clenched, his body forward, and his hectic breathing, his chest was going up and down as if he had just witnessed a show he was incredibly proud of and excited about. He was almost off his throne to go and run to her, but Cessilia wasn't looking.

Suddenly, someone began to clap in the audience. A bit shocked, eyes looked around for who had the guts to be applauding the Princess at this moment, until they spotted her.

Jisel. In the crowd, she was smiling from ear to ear, staring at the Princess and clapping slowly, in total disruption of the atmosphere in the room. She almost looked a bit crazy to be clapping like this, as if this was just a nice show... Then, Bastat began to clap too, followed by another



anonymous candidate. One by one, a few people found the strength to applaud, but it fell a bit flat, a bit out of place... especially when the Princess glared at the King's mistress like that.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

The strident voice coming from the main doors seemed to wake everyone up from a very strange nightmare. All eyes turned to the doors, where a young servant suddenly ran into the banquet room, disregarding everyone there, and threw herself at the feet of the King.

“My King! A murder! There was a murder!”

“What?” hissed the King, jumping to his feet.

“Lady Vena of the Pangoja Clan was found dead! Someone murdered her!”

Many panicked whispers rose in the room, but Jisel's chuckle came to Cessilia's ears.

“Oh my, I did not think this banquet would be that interesting... I'm glad I came after all!”

The King's mistress was the only one enjoying herself there. Everyone else was in shock, and several people, most likely from the Pangoja Clan, let out loud cries and screams.

“My King, it can't be!” shouted an older man.

“Wasn't she here just a while ago?” frowned Axelane, the candidate from the Nahaf Family.

“What happened?” asked Ashen, glaring down at the servant. “Speak!”

“I... I just left the lady for a few minutes to go and get her some water, but when I came back, I found my poor lady dead in her room, lying in so much blood! Someone violently stabbed her multiple times, my King, it was a murder!”

“Guards!” the King shouted. “Guard the doors to this hall, no one comes in and no one leaves until my return!”

He angrily stormed off, briefly glancing at Cessilia on his way out. It was a brief, fleeting moment that lasted less than a second when their eyes met. Cessilia tried to look away, but it was already too late. After a slight hesitation, she turned her gaze to stare at Ashen's back as he left the room, then at the doors after they were closed behind him. Even after the King's departure, things were chaotic in the hall. Many women were crying, and some men were angrily shouting, some trying to convince the Royal Guards to let them leave the room to go see Vena's body as well.

In the midst of this, Cessilia sighed faintly and picked up the fur cloak she had previously taken off. She softly brushed it, making sure no little shards of glass were on it. Meanwhile, Nana quietly walked up to her and Tessandra, the Counselors behind her, visibly scared too.

"I can't believe she was really killed... That there's a murderer in the castle..." Nana muttered, her lips trembling.

"No one mentioned the murderer had to be human," said the candidate from before.

"Lady Ashra, I suggest you measure your words," Bastat calmly declared.

Cessilia suddenly realized that candidate was the one they had seen with Jisel previously, along with Vena. She hadn't recognized her, since her hairdo and clothes had changed, plus she had only seen that woman briefly from afar. Ashra of the Yekara Clan. Just like her cousin Safia, this woman looked arrogant and vain. She shrugged at Bastat's words, crossing her arms with a little smirk.

"Did I say anything wrong? The Princess just showed off her man-killing beast, did she not? Was I mistaken, that you threatened to murder your enemies?"

"My p-point is that I will not stoop d-down t-to your level," Cessilia retorted. "I d-don't do th-things in secrecy, and I d-don't need t-to hide what I am c-capable of. I won't lower myself or p-put on a p-play t-to make you satisfied."

“That’s one rare skill around here,” scoffed another candidate, one of the other two that hadn’t been introduced yet. “Most ladies here play nice in public and hide their claws... For someone to act the opposite is one change I’d like to see happen.”

From her skin that was a shade slightly paler than most people in the room, and how she seemed to be among the rare candidates to respect her, Cessilia guessed she was Ishira, the candidate of the Hashat Family. Dressed in a long, indigo-blue dress, she bowed politely to the Princess as their eyes met, confirming her pacific intentions.

“Already ready to follow in the Princess’ shadow, Hashat?” scoffed Safia. “So typical of your clan of cowards...”

“You’re the one who should watch it,” Ishira hissed back.

“We’re only speaking the truth. Moreover, the Princess left the room earlier, didn’t she? I saw her leave, just a while before Vena was murdered. Why would she leave the banquet at all, when we weren’t done presenting ourselves, and plus, to return afterward? Her room isn’t so far, either. It’s only facts. She had the time, and a motive to kill Vena, didn’t she? One less candidate, wouldn’t you have been relieved to take that eyesore out of your way?”

“Lady Safia!” protested Naptunie, furious. “How dare you make such accusations?! Lady Cessilia is innocent, she only left for a short while, and why would she kill Lady Vena?!”

“Who knows,” shrugged Safia, visibly amused to have everyone’s attention, and to sow some doubt around. “Perhaps the Princess thinks this whole competition isn’t worth the trouble.”

“It’s not the t-trouble t-to murder someone either,” said Cessilia, annoyed. “I d-don’t need t-to lie or cheat.”

“Unlike some people we know,” scoffed Tessandra.

“How dare you accuse us of cheating?!”

“You’re welcome to return our gold anytime, then. Don’t you play Miss Righteous with us any longer. First, our room was ransacked, and now another candidate was killed. How much dirtier is this going to get?”

“She has a point,” said Bastat, crossing her arms. “None of the clans will follow a queen that gets her way with tricks, lies, and murders. Lady Cessilia may have brought a dragon, but she also proved she didn’t need one.”

“How is that?!” shouted Safia. “What can she do without her dragon, then?”

“Are you by any chance blind?” said Ishira, sighing. “Her hands are like this because she manipulated glass to make herself a dress after her belongings were vandalized. It takes courage to purposely injure yourself, even if you have great healing abilities. Not only that, but she sent a warning rather than an act of revenge, and she bested us all in showing her abilities, those she used and those she didn’t. You can’t claim Princess Cessilia’s efforts were for naught, unless you really want to act blind. ...Oh, and please spare us your usual dramatic shock. Do not pretend, you were all gloating about how she would have nothing to wear tonight. Seems like you were quite off the mark.”

Safia’s mouth opened and closed several times, completely in shock at how Ishira had just defended Cessilia. She clenched her fists, humiliated like a child.

“I... I only heard it from the servants! And it doesn’t prove she had nothing to do with Vena’s murder! Or are you also going to pretend she couldn’t have done it? You all saw her leave too!”

Tessandra glared around, but this time, none of the candidates spoke up in their favor. Bastat and Ishira turned their heads, visibly deciding to ignore Safia’s claim or pay attention any longer. The other candidates were exchanging looks, either smiling at the idea of cornering the Dragon Princess, or simply curious as to what was to unfold next. In fact, while they waited for the King’s return, the whole audience seemed captivated by the fight between the beautiful ladies present. They were all whispering

in low voices, unwilling to take part themselves but happy to witness. Behind the two candidates of the Yekara Clan, many people were glaring at the Princess, or whispering about how she could have murdered Vena. The only people invested were those who had been crying since earlier, Vena's people, the Pangoja Clan. Their other candidate, Istis, had red eyes, but was visibly holding it in. Instead, she glared at Cessilia, stepping forward.

“Don't you have anything to say for yourself, Princess?” she said. “You should at least explain where you were!”

Cessilia stared at her, unwilling to speak. She took a deep breath in and slowly shook her head.

“I d-did not k-kill her. Nor order anyone t-to do so.”

“That doesn't tell us where you were!” shouted Ashra, a snarky smile on. “Could it be you have no one to take your defense, Princess? No witness to confirm wherever you went? Isn't it odd, for someone always stuck with the Dorosef girl and that boyish woman?”

Next to Cessilia, Nana furiously clenched her fists, stepping forward, but Tessandra raised her hand, and faintly shook her head, telling her to stay back. Instead, Yassim stepped forward.

“Lady Ashra, you should not—”

“Shut up, old man. I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to the Princess. You stutter but you should at least be able to say something for yourself, no?”

“...That won't be necessary.”

The calm voice took everyone by surprise.

With a faint smile on her face, Jisel stepped forward, her hands behind her back and an innocent look on. She was the last person they had all expected to speak up right then. In fact, most had completely forgotten her presence at all. She had been waiting in the shadows all this time, only to come out now. It was clear the King's mistress was amused by the situation. Even Ashra and Safia exchanged a stunned look. The redhead

put her fingers to her lips, smiling at them, a smile that didn't foreshadow anything good.

"I'm impressed," she said loud enough for all to hear. "His Majesty is gone, yet so many young ladies are eager to acquire justice themselves."

"That's not it," declared Safia, frowning. "We were merely asking questions!"

"Really? I thought you were almost going to murder the Princess here and now. Or at least, scratch her face or something. I am a bit disappointed."

Everyone was shocked by her words, but there definitely was a hint of truth in them... They had been quite ruthless. Jisel chuckled at their stunned faces.

"Do you have something to say?" asked Safia, impatient.

Cessilia noted how, unlike her cousin, Ashra had gone carefully silent right now, her eyes on the redhead. It was as if she had forgotten Cessilia to focus on Jisel instead, with something more complex, like... fear in her eyes.

"I do," said Jisel. "The Princess is innocent, I will vouch for her."

"...What now?" exclaimed Tessa, raising her eyebrows.

Cessilia was just as confused. However, Jisel smiled at her briefly, before turning to Safia again.

"There, you have it. You wanted a witness, didn't you? I saw where she went and when she came back. She did not kill Lady Vena."

"But—"

"Are you doubting my words?"

Jisel's question held more threat than it seemed. Safia glanced toward her cousin, but seeing how passive Ashra had gotten, she swallowed her saliva, and possibly her pride.

"Fine..."

However, Cessilia wasn't fine. She wasn't happy with having Jisel stand up for her, of all people. She didn't understand why that woman had done that.

Jisel smiled, visibly satisfied with the candidates dropping the whole subject, and slowly walked up to Cessilia. Around them, no one dared to make loud comments anymore, and seemingly, the people from each tribe were talking between themselves, most likely about the murder. Hence, with most people forgetting about them, she freely approached Cessilia. Her eyes went to the fur cloak on the Princess' shoulders, and she chuckled.

"I've seen that ugly thing somewhere."

"I d-didn't need your help."

"I know. But I figured you wouldn't want to let the others know about what had really happened earlier. Am I wrong?"

Cessilia remained silent, refusing to give in to her questions. Jisel chuckled.

"So stubborn, Princess. That must come from your father, the War God. If your mother is like most of the long-lost Rain Tribe, she is probably more... flexible."

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a look. Although they had suspected it all this time, it was quite odd to hear Jisel mention the Rain Tribe. The redhead noticed and tilted her head.

"Oh, please. You must have realized, right? You and I are probably distant relatives or something..."

"Our mothers had told us most of the Rain Tribe was gone."

"Gone... or captured," said Jisel. "After all, your mothers were made slaves, weren't they? A concubine and a prostitute..."

Tessandra's eyes opened wide, and her hand went to her sword. Cessilia reacted fast, grabbing her wrist before she pulled it out. Tessandra's hand froze, but she still glared at the mistress.

“How much do you know about my mother?” she hissed.

“Just a little,” Jisel shrugged. “When the news spread that the War God’s woman was white-skinned, it got some attention even on this side of the border. The few who had survived the onslaught on the Rain Tribe tried to find out more, naturally. The women who had been made slaves... like my own mother. I guess not everyone could have a beautiful ending, though. She lived and died a slave, like most of those who had been captured. A handful lived long enough to be free again or bear the bastard children of their masters. The Hashat Family has a few of those, as well, you must have heard.”

She sighed and glanced toward the little group behind Ishira. Curiously, among all the people present there, they were those who seemed to be glancing their way the most. Even more surprising, they didn’t seem nearly ready to approach, some of them glaring at Jisel.

“...They don’t seem fond of you,” noted Tessandra.

“No. But not many people are, I would say. It’s one of the privileges of being the King’s mistress... Most people want you dead, or in their bed.”

She turned to the Hashat Family and smiled at them suddenly, which made those people uncomfortable, and they all stopped staring. Jisel scoffed.

“...Cowards, most of them.”

“How in the hell did you get in the King’s bed, then...” muttered Tessandra.

“I was lucky... Someone left that spot empty.”

Cessilia drew out Tessandra’s sword with one movement. The blade flew in the air, so quickly and swiftly, no one but Tessa realized at first. She stopped it one inch away from Jisel’s neck, her green eyes glaring at the young woman with murderous intent. Even worse, Jisel smiled and tilted her head.

“You could, you know. I’m sure no one would cry... Absolutely no one, I promise.”



She seemed to almost be offering her neck, but that only made Cessilia more reluctant to kill that woman. Still, her fingers were shaking on the blade. It might have been even more visible if they weren't covered in scales.

"C-Cessi..." Nana whispered, a bit worried.

Eventually, Tessa raised her hand, and slowly took the sword from Cessilia's hands while the two women were still glaring at each other. Around them, many eyes caught sight of the Princess almost killing the King's mistress, and they were all curious as to what was going on. One of the women seemed amused, the other furious.

Jisel shrugged.

"I told you, I am not your enemy."

"Don't count on us braiding each other's hair either," retorted Tessandra.

"Oh, I know. However, I don't have anything against you... unlike some of the ladies here. Perhaps you should think twice before making me your enemy."

Outside of the room, Krai suddenly growled, making everyone jump, quickly reminded of the dragon's presence. Its ruthless climbing on the building made strange sounds on the stone, and its growls were heard once again.

"...A dragon d-doesn't share," said Cessilia.

"Maybe he could learn to."

"No."

This time, the Princess turned around, walking toward the main doors and away from the women. She was fed up with all this, and not in a mood to entertain her rival, or any of the others, anymore.

"Come on, Nana," said Tessandra, gently pulling her to follow.

"But—"

“We’re done here. Let’s just go back before another bitch decides to annoy the heck out of us...”

Nana nodded and quickly followed behind Cessilia and Tessa. While the three women were about to head out, Cessilia in front, the doors opened before them again. The King was back.

Cessilia briefly raised her eyes, spotting the blood on his hands, and his furious expression. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and she stepped aside, making a visible detour to avoid him. Ashen stopped and watched her leave, even staring at her back until it disappeared in the corridors. Then, his eyes went back in front, spotting his mistress, alone in the center of the room. She crossed her arms again with a little smirk, and turned around, walking toward the broken window. While the storm had quieted down, the dragon outside was still agitated, growling and making a ruckus. Jisel smiled, staring at the black scales through the hole.

“The War Dragon, huh...”

Another growl sounded, and Krai moved again, its red eye appearing at the window. Many people screamed in fear and stepped farther away, except for Jisel. Her smile disappeared.

“Oh, you can tell, can’t you? ...You’re not the only monster here.”