

The White King's Favorite

Chapter 11-15

Chapter 11

Cessilia trusted Tessandra's fighting skills enough to leave her and Sabael behind, but she was more worried about

Nana. The young girl had realized what was going on and was helplessly hanging on to her, maybe even crying.

"What do they want? Why are they pursuing us?!"

Cessilia didn't have time to answer her. She was busy navigating their horse through a place she didn't know well at

all, under the darkness of night and the downpour, riding as fast as possible to the next gate. She was worried more people

were after them and targeting her. From the looks of it, this was all a set-up. It was obvious that whoever had made sure they

wouldn't be able to get back through the nearest door had also hired people to attack.

Did someone spot Krai when they left?

They wanted to get rid of her while she was far from the castle. In this downpour and that place, it would even take a while

before they got worried about her and Tessa's disappearance...

Her main thought was that she couldn't get Naptunie involved. Although she was a candidate too, chances were low

that she was those men's target. The Royal Guard from earlier had barely glanced at her... Cessilia was glad they had chosen to

rent horses. Otherwise, she couldn't imagine the nightmare of escaping those men on foot... She glanced up, but they wouldn't

make it out by the sky, either. Even if she tried to call Krai now, the dragon wouldn't possibly hear her. They were on their

own.

She heard the pounding of several hooves on the streets of cobblestone and glanced over her shoulder. It wasn't Tessa,

but more pursuers! Why were there so many of them? What had become of her cousin?

Had she and Sabael chosen another way

back? All the streets were so similar, if it wasn't for Nana guiding her from time to time, she wouldn't have known where to

go... It was getting late and dark too. The streets were getting darker and more intimidating around them, flooded by the rain

that wasn't stopping. Cessilia clenched her teeth and had the horse accelerate, more determined than ever.

"Cessi..."

She heard Nana cry a bit behind her, and she could feel the fear in her voice. It ought to be scary, both their situation

and their speed, but they couldn't slow down. Cessilia had thought about it, but she couldn't part with Nana, who didn't know

how to ride the horse alone. They had to keep riding until they saw the door, or when Tessandra and Sabael appeared. She didn't even have a weapon to defend herself with! Even her hands had turned back to normal already, her claws and scales gone...

Suddenly, she heard Nana shout, and something flew past her shoulder. An arrow!

"Nana! Are you okay?"

"My shoulder..."

Nana was hit? Cessilia panicked, but just as she was trying to look behind her, their horse whined loudly, and suddenly pitched up without warning. Cessilia tried to hang on to the bridle, but it was no use; the horse completely collapsed onto its side, and she felt Nana fall off before she did. She heard a scream, one second before her own body fell.

Cessilia's head hit the ground, brutally. She felt the pain resonate in her whole body, and right after, another wave of pain came, from her lower body this time. Something heavy fell on top of her, crushing her and making her gasp for air.

"Cessi!"

She looked around, trying to see Nana, but her voice had definitely come from above, and Cessilia's body was stuck in the opposite direction, toward the ground.

"Nana, r-run! I'm fine, g-go!"

"B-but..."

"Run!" Cessilia roared.

The young woman hesitated but took a step back, and turned around, running away while holding her injured shoulder.

Cessilia thought she saw the shaft of an arrow sticking out, but she wasn't sure. For now, she was pressed against the ground by the horse on top of her, barely able to see anything. She could feel the steps and horses running her way. She tried to move, to get out of there. If her arm wasn't already trapped underneath, she could have lifted that horse off of her! The whole horse's dead weight was pinning her down, and a normal woman would have been completely unable to move, but Cessilia was stronger than the norm. Grunting and ignoring all the pain in her body, she was fighting to free herself. The downpour felt like it was trying to pin her down too. Each movement let her know of an injury in another part of her body, which made her worried that getting out of there would be for nothing. She could tell her ankle was broken, at the very least, and perhaps a rib or two.

She couldn't believe how bad her situation had gotten in minutes. She couldn't die here! She kept trying to push the huge weight off of her with one arm, grunting and panting in the flooded street, looking out

for the enemies running her way. She was out of time, and Tessa was nowhere in sight.

"Cessi!"

That voice sent a cold shiver down her spine. Cessilia struggled to turn around, and spotted, from the corner of her eye, Nana's silhouette running back toward her.

"Nana, no!" she shouted.

"I can't leave you," cried the young girl.

She was already by her side, and trying her best to pull the horse. Cessilia was shocked, she couldn't believe the young woman was back, in tears and probably terrified, but still there. She was in awe at Nana's bravery, but this was suicide! The men were almost there. She turned her head, seeing their figures almost on them. They were both going to get killed any minute now!

Suddenly, a large shadow jumped over them. The largest black horse she'd ever seen jumped in the middle of the opponent, and silver lightning immediately sliced one of them in two. The action was so fast, their attackers were thrown into complete disarray. The horses panicked, the men shouted, yelled, trying to face the threat. Their weapons were swung around recklessly, unable to take a hold of him. It was like a god of death had appeared among them. An imposing figure, with a black cloak covering him. The large blade was moving swiftly, flying in the air and sending blood and limbs to the ground. Swish, swish, swish. It seemed like he was cutting through men, weapons, and the rain alike. Someone screamed, and orders were shouted to retreat, but that wouldn't happen. There was nowhere to flee and no way they could escape from that monster among them.

Still pressed against the cold cobblestone, Cessilia could only witness the scene. His large stature as he jumped down from his horse, and when the hood fell back, his white hair flew around him like a mane. He was moving at an impressive speed, yet each of his movements was graceful, perfect. A dance of death defeating all their enemies, leaving them no hope of survival. The teachings of a War God sharpened to perfection. Cessilia was so fascinated, she had completely forgotten about her pain and struggle, just to watch him. Ashen's fighting stance was fueled by his anger, making him both captivating and scary. She held her breath at each movement of his sword, each time she could see his dark, dangerous eyes shining. The White King was right in front of her, saving her and leaving her breathless, mesmerized. She had to watch his back, mostly, as he refused to move from where he stood, using his long sword to reach all enemies and standing like a wall to defend her. From panic, Cessilia's heartbeat had switched to a different tune, still so fast, but for a different reason now.

When the last enemies turned around, desperate to flee, he grabbed a blade abandoned on the ground and threw it like a spear across the street. A scream echoed back, and a dull sound. Then, he turned around and ran to cover the short distance between them.

His expression changed from anger to fear as he reached her side.

"Cessilia! Are you alright?"

"I'm... fine," she grunted, remembering that horse on top of her.

Ashen glared at the dead horse and moved to push it off her. Compared to what Nana had been trying to do earlier, he single-handedly pushed it out of the way as if it was nothing. The young woman stepped back, intimidated. She could only witness silently as the King put one knee down in front of Cessilia. They were both in a mess, soaked and bloodied, but right now, those two looked like they were part of a different world, something she couldn't intrude on. His movements to get Cessilia out of there were incredibly gentle. He carefully brushed her wet curls away from her face and pulled her into his embrace. The King's eyes which forever looked angry, now looked as if he was the one in pain. He was touching the Princess as if she was the most precious and fragile thing in the world, frowning at each wound his eyes uncovered.

"H-how come you're..." Cessilia muttered.

"I saw your dragon from the castle. ...Who the fuck did this?"

Cessilia shook her head. For now, she was too exhausted, injured, and soaked to care.

Ashen grunted, but very gently, he took off his cloak to put over her, wrapping her body in it as much as he could, trying to be careful. It was no use, though.

Cessilia grimaced, her body aching all over. The King's hands froze, and his expression fell. He looked as if he was torn apart, and lowered his head.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

She froze, hearing those words so faintly she thought she had dreamed them. Yet, rather than standing back up right

away, Ashen was hugging her, his face buried against her shoulder. She could feel his clenched fists on the coat, and his

shoulders shaking. She could even feel and hear his erratic breathing. Was it anger, or frustration? Was he thinking what had

happened here was his fault? Cessilia's heart missed a beat. This was the first time she'd seen him so vulnerable... Despite the

pain, she moved her hand over his neck. As soon as she touched his head, Ashen's entire body froze. She slowly caressed the

hair over his nape, to comfort him. Even wet, it was smooth under her fingers. Cessilia had been wanting to touch his white

hair since she had seen him again. She wanted to remember how close they used to be and discover the man he had become

since. She wanted to feel the touch of his skin, the shape of his muscles underneath, and learn his smell. Right now, Ashen smelled of blood, sweat, and rain. For a while, he didn't dare move, and the two of them remained like that, in the rain, simply holding each other gently.

Then, he pulled his face away from her shoulder, his dark, mysterious eyes staring at her with a complex expression.

Cessilia wished she could get a grasp of the thoughts behind those eyes... Ashen was looking at her with so much emotion in his eyes, yet all of it felt like a secret she couldn't seize. For a second, his lips parted, and he leaned forward, their faces so close she thought he was going to kiss her.

Ashen sighed and pulled back a bit. He finally lifted her, holding Cessilia in his arms, so she could lean against his

shoulder. He wasn't putting any distance between them, but now, his eyes were looking beyond her, in front. Cessilia didn't

care much at this instant. She simply didn't want to move. His warmth and tight embrace were the most comforting place right

now, that was all she needed. Her Dragon Blood was working to ease the pain of her injuries, but it couldn't numb it or make

her feel safe like Ashen's presence did; she felt all the anxiety, fear, and panic from earlier slowly lifting from her body. It was

as if something previously lost had been rebuilt between them. She trusted him completely to keep her safe now.

"Cessi!"

Tessandra came running from the other street, only to find her cousin already tightly wrapped in the King's arms. She

stopped, glancing at Cessilia's relaxed expression. The Princess seemed half-asleep, and carried like a precious package,

while the King looked like he wouldn't let go of her for anything in the world. Tessandra hesitated. Perhaps her cousin couldn't

hear her. She glared at the white-haired King, but after a hesitation, she didn't say anything. Instead, she glanced around. Her

eyes went around the dead horse, Naptunie standing alone a couple of steps farther, and all the scattered bodies. She had

enough knowledge about battlefields to be able to quickly catch a grasp of what had happened here. She sighed, and with a

sullen expression, put her sword back in its sheath. Behind her, Sabael arrived a bit late, only to see the King already turning

away.

It was a lonely scene in the street. Naptunie scampered to join Tessa's side, making a detour to not get in the King's

way. No one said a word. The three of them, left behind, simply watched the King's lonely figure carrying Cessilia away.

The King's horse, completely fine, was left behind with them. Ashen had no intention to ride back and risk making the

Princess' injuries more painful. Carrying Cessilia, he walked alone, all the way back to the castle, not showing an ounce of fatigue. Even with his white hair, some people rushing in the streets glanced twice, but most didn't even notice their monarch walking amongst them. The downpour was making everyone run home and not care for anything else. He was the only one making his way up to the castle.

"You shouldn't have gone out," he muttered.

Cessilia's eyes opened faintly. Through the thin window of vision she had under the cloak, she recognized the streets of the Inner Capital already. Her injuries weren't as painful anymore, but the healing process had gotten her tired. She sighed.

"Ashen, I c-can walk..."

"No."

She had expected this much, and she didn't feel like fighting him. She didn't mind him carrying her. Instead, she was more worried at how drenched the King was, and how cold his body had gotten.

"...You shouldn't have gone out of the castle without telling me," he muttered again. "I was worried."

"You d-didn't leave me much room to t-talk."

"You could have sent a servant to me."

"I don't t-trust them."

To her surprise, he sighed. In front of them, the guards opened the gates, not hiding their surprise at their King's appearance.

"...I know."

Without adding a word, he climbed the stairs of the castle, taking her through the maze of corridors. She didn't know where they were going, but she quickly realized it wasn't the Cerulean Suite. After a while, some servants stepped aside to open a door.

"No one is allowed to enter," he hissed.

The doors were closed behind them, and Cessilia tried to look around.

It was a small room, with a large chimney, a simple canopy bed with heavy curtains, a large fur rug, and a couple of seats. The only decorations were the few draperies on the walls, and the large blade hung next to them, similar to the one Ashen carried. Someone had already lit a fire in the room, and despite the rain blowing against the window, it was quite warm in there.

Ashen gently carried her to one of the large leather seats, putting Cessilia down as carefully as he could. To her surprise, he simply stayed there, down on one knee, in front of her. As soon as he had put her down, it was as if he didn't dare touch her anymore. She took off the cloak herself, feeling a bit stuffy now with the fire next to them. Ashen frowned as her

injuries were uncovered again.

"...Don't get yourself hurt again," he muttered.

"I d-didn't choose t-to be in this situation," she sighed.

He remained mute for a few minutes, his fists clenched.

"I will find who did this."

"I'll find th-them myself," said Cessilia. "This is m-my p-problem."

"It is mine too. I wanted you to stay... I didn't think you'd get hurt."

"Ashen."

Cessilia grabbed his face between her hands, forcing him to look at her. His dark eyes looked full of pain each time he

looked at her, and only when he looked at her. She could almost hear him suffering inside. He put his hand over hers, without pushing it away, simply caressing her skin.

"I'm th-the one who chose t-to stay," she said, "b-but you d-didn't give me a reason t-to, yet."

He took a deep breath, and very slowly, turned his head, kissing her palm. The contact of his lips sent shivers down her

back. The pain and cold from earlier were almost forgotten already, replaced by this delicious warmth between them. Her heart that had calmed down accelerated a little.

"...Stay with me tonight," he muttered. "Please."

Cessi's throat tightened a little. She wasn't prepared to see Ashen like this, almost begging at her feet... The King who

looked so fierce while killing two dozen murderers now looked completely helpless and at her mercy. Why was it that he

showed this part of him only when the two of them were alone? Cessilia tried to take a deep breath in. She nodded and, very slowly, leaned forward to kiss his lips. There was something empowering about making the next move, and knowing she was

the one giving him the right to kiss her or not. Ashen almost seemed to hesitate, but very quickly, he recovered and kissed her back.

It was a long, tender kiss. A kiss that tasted like rain and firewood. Ashen's lips were almost hesitant as if he was

prepared for Cessilia to pull back at any moment. She didn't. The Princess just wanted to feel him, to feel his warmth against her lips, against her skin. Without even thinking about it, their hands found each other on her knee, and they intertwined their

fingers. Ashen sat completely at her feet, while Cessi was leaning forward to reach him. He was tall enough that she didn't

have to lean too much, and their bodies met halfway. She even caressed his white hair which she adored, and his hand softly held her lower back too.

After a short while, they parted, both much calmer now. A few inches between them, they didn't sit back completely,

still leaning toward each other, as if they couldn't bear to part anymore. Ashen sighed.

“...Are you alright?”

“I’m f-fine.”

She was telling the truth. Her Dragon Blood was numbing and healing all the injured parts of her body. The most painful was her broken ribs, being mended together at a much faster pace than the norm. Ashen frowned, looking like he was the one in pain once more. He shook his head and put his forehead against her knee, his white hair falling down his shoulders.

“I shouldn’t have let you go through this,” he groaned. “I knew all those wretched women were going to come after you if I showed you even just a bit of interest, but...”

“Ashen,” Cessilia called him angrily, “d-don’t ignore me b-because of some o-other women. D-don’t pretend th-that is the only reason, either.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he sighed, raising his dark eyes to her. “I just... I really wasn’t prepared to see you again,

Cessi. I left the Dragon Empire angry, bitter, but most of all, I missed you like crazy. I missed you each day, hour, minute since I

had to leave. I dreamt of you every night, and even during the day. I never thought I would get to see you again... not unless I

came to get you myself. And now, here you are, a full-grown woman, appearing at a time in my life when I thought I would have to settle with another woman.”

“Like J-Jisel?” she asked angrily.

“No!” he protested. “It’s true Jisel has... She has been by my side for a while now, and she’s... Cessi, she’s nothing like you, I swear. I don’t love her.”

“You slept with her.”

Her words were like a dagger in his heart, but he couldn’t deny or avoid the Princess’ anger. He lowered his head.

“I... I don’t want to lie to you,” he muttered.

Cessilia made a sour expression, and turned her face to the fire, disappointed. She knew it since she had seen Jisel by

his side, but it was still bitter to hear the confirmation. She took back her hand and clenched her fists on her skirt, tightly, refusing to look at him. She knew she had to calm the anger in her heart first.

“...Have you s-slept with her since I arrived?”

“No!”

Ashen had shouted so loud she jumped. She finally looked at him, but the King looked almost horrified by her words.

“Cessilia, do you think I’d have an ounce of desire left for any other woman now that you’re here? Do you have any idea what you do to me?!”

He grabbed her hands, not forcefully, but holding them in his grasp, looking her right in the eye.

"Cessilia, there's only you. It's only been you, all this time. You've been the only one on my mind, even when I held other women to satisfy my desires. Yes, I slept with others, and I did it without an ounce of love for them. Not even a thousandth of what I feel for you. I've been so cruel to those women who tried to get something out of me, and I can't even feel sorry. I did it because I was desperate that it couldn't be you in my arms."

Cessilia's heartbeat accelerated a bit at the thought of this. She hated that he had slept with other women, but she loved that he thought about her each time he did. It was a horrible feeling, a bittersweet mix of anger, pain, and envy. Even if she hated each one of them, she couldn't help but be jealous of those women. She had come here knowing what it would imply, to be the White King's woman. Worse, she desired it too.

"Even when I tried to forget," he continued, "the memories of you came back to hit me even harder. The more I tried, the harder it was to forget you. A thousand times, I tried to imagine what it would be like if one day I could finally go back to the Empire. Each time I imagined you possibly falling for another man, or getting married while I was stuck here because of the war... Sometimes it hurt so much I thought I'd go insane."

"What ab-bout the c-competition?" she asked, her voice a bit more hoarse than she'd have wanted.

Ashen scoffed bitterly.

"Not my choice... My position is more fragile than it looks. All the main families want me to have an heir... to have one of their descendants as my heir. That's the only way they'd leave me alone and stop fighting me, I guess. The problem is, they all want me to marry one of their daughters. So I let them decide to have that stupid competition. I couldn't have cared less for who won... until you came."

His expression softened, and he raised his hand. After a hesitation, and seeing Cessilia wasn't backing away, he gently caressed her cheek. His large, warm hand against her cheek sent delicious shivers down her spine, and she put her hand over his.

"...I'm sorry," he muttered.

She was a bit surprised at his sudden apologetic tone but waited to let him speak.

Ashen's expression looked so tired, something that had nothing to do with the earlier fight. The White King looked exhausted overall... but right in this moment, all of him was leaning toward her, and he was leaning against her legs, the two of them sharing each other's warmth in front of the burning fire.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I just... I couldn't believe it when I saw you here. Even now, I'm scared your father or your

brothers will appear, and take you away from me... a second time. I never thought Yassim would bring you all the way here, and I never thought I would have a chance to... to have you."

"B-but I wanted you t-too," she muttered. "I d-don't c-care about the c-competition either, Ashen. I c-came here bbecause I still love you t-too. I... I really th-thought you had sent Yassim t-to ask me to marry you."

"If I had thought it was possible, I would have married you the second you came."

"...Why d-do you say it like that?"

"Look at yourself, Cessilia. You haven't been here for a week, and you almost got killed already! I want you. I want you more than anything in this world. But... but I was foolish enough to agree to this competition, and you too. Now, every single one of those bastards will have put a target on your back and try to kill you. If something happens to you, I won't forgive myself. ...I won't come back from it, Cessilia. At least, in the Dragon Empire, you were safe. But here—"

"Ashen, look at-t me," she ordered.

He raised his head again and met the Princess' eyes, her emerald irises glowing with the fire's light in them. She held his hand against her cheek, but her stare on him was fierce. She was like a queen looking at her servant, confident and strong.

"I won't lose t-to them," she said. "Th-those women can't d-defeat me. I won't be k-killed, either. And I kn-know you're t-trying hard t-to save your K-Kingdom too. I d-don't want t-to take that away f-from you, Ashen."

"Cessilia, you don't understand. I may be the King, but most of them don't want me. I had to establish myself through—"

"Th-through fear? I went t-to the Muram Village t-today."

Ashen's expression fell.

"Why did you go there...?"

"I wanted t-to know how you won all th-those fights so fast. I saw you b-being t-trained by my dad. I saw how you fought t-tonight too. You're strong, Ashen, b-but you're not a god. T-tell me the t-truth. Why d-did you let th-that women d-drug those men?"

Ashen looked in complete shock. He tried to take his hand away from her face, but this time, Cessilia held his wrist.

She used just the right amount of strength, so he would have to use force to free himself. He didn't. Instead, he stared at the Princess, a bit shocked. Her bright green eyes left him no room to escape, and no room for lies, either. She already knew the truth.

"It was the fastest way, and the safest one for the villagers too," he muttered.

"Ashen!"

"I didn't want to use that method! I swear, Cessilia, I didn't... but half my Kingdom is occupied by bastards like them, and the rest is dying of hunger! What was I supposed to do? It took me five years just to regain control of the Capital and its surroundings, and you have no idea how hard it was!"

"You c-can't drug your opponents t-to win a fair fight!"

"Those men don't deserve a fair fight, Cessi! Didn't you hear what they did?"

"C-can you b-be sure that's what they d-did, each one of them? If th-those men are half of your p-people, Ashen, what d-do you think made th-them like this in the first p-place? Where d-do you th-think they c-came from?"

His expression fell. He knew all too well. Those men he had slaughtered were like any other citizen, just a few years ago. Citizens who had grown tired of hunger, citizens who couldn't live like they used to anymore. Those men had lived through wars, civil wars, and his own father's tyranny. Some had become soldiers while hoping for a better future, but their futures had been ruined by war itself. They had been ruined by his predecessors' greed and mistakes, and he was the last one left to try and suture a bleeding wound. He was alone to mend what had been shattered by twenty years of wrong rulers, and he was seen as a bastard King himself. His father's blood had been a curse he couldn't get rid of, while Cessilia's parents' teachings had been his only blessing.

"...I tried, Cessi. I swear, I tried, I tried so hard, I almost got killed a hundred times. I used... every single thing your

father taught me. I did everything right. For so long, I tried to lead each battle while giving what you call a fair fight. Each time,

I put my life on the line, with the fear my homeland would die with me. Look!"

He stood up into the light showing her all of his scars. Cessilia had already seen them before, but it still hurt each time

she had to see them. Some were so large, or so long, she couldn't believe he had survived that. There wasn't a part of his body

that wasn't covered in those white lines, some over the previous ones. His body was that of a warrior ten years older that had

gone to war for most of his life. Ashen wasn't old enough to have this many scars...

"This is what I got, from trying to heal this Kingdom the right way. For a while, I got drunk on battles, you know.

Fighting was easier than doing nothing, and being left alone with the memories of you... but after a while, it became my

nightmare. One fight after another, every day, as if my life had been nothing but a succession of fights. I fought mercenaries by

day, assassins by night. For each time I was grateful for your father's teachings, I couldn't help but remember he had a dragon

too. I didn't have a dragon or even a real friend to help me. When... When Jisel came up with this idea, I realized this would

make it all easier, faster. I said yes, because I was tired, and I thought if I was, my people were also probably begging for me to deliver them faster.”

“...N-no, Ashen,” she said, standing up. “You sh-shouldn’t have a-agreed. Th-there are so many ways t-to win fights.

Without d-dragons, without d-drugs and p-poisons.”

Ashen took a step back, shaking his head helplessly.

“Cessilia, please... please, you have to understand. This isn’t the Empire you know.

What you saw at the Muram

Village... It’s the same everywhere. I tried everything I could before it came to this! Each time I offered to take prisoners, I left

them a chance to put down their weapons. Half of the time, they didn’t listen, and when they did, it was to try and trick me.”

He brushed his white hair back with a tired look.

“I know it’s... it’s not ideal, Cessilia. I know it’s nothing like what I would have wanted to show you. But this is the

best I could do. It was the painful and hard way, but slowly, I’ve done it. I became King, and I made all the Lords of the

strongest clans listen to me. ...I’ve brought peace to this country.”

“No.”

He looked up, but the Princess looked almost angry.

“You b-brought nothing b-but fear. And fear b-brings more anger.”

“No,” he shook his head. “Cessilia, you don’t know what it’s like. You’ve never faced men like these, your country

hasn’t known war since you were born. Your family has dragons for every fight they face! You don’t know what it’s like to put

your life on the line, every day...”

“I kn-know.”

He frowned, confused. Cessilia sighed and left the coat on the seat. Slowly, she pulled her hair back. Her fingers were

trembling a bit, but her expression was determined. She took a deep breath and began to undo the clasp of her choker, behind

her neck.

“I d-don’t th-think you understand,” she muttered. “Th-the g-girl you knew was only th-thirteen years old. It’s t-true I d-didn’t

know much, b-back then. B-but I wasn’t afraid of anything. I d-didn’t fear g-going to your K-Kingdom, either. I th-thought

it would b-be fine as long as I was with you... Th-that night, I left the Onyx C-Castle, in secret, with my d-dragon.”

Ashen’s expression fell.

“N-no,” he muttered. “No. ...I waited. I waited several nights at the spot we had promised to meet, Cessilia, but you

never came. I thought you had decided not to follow me.”

“I wanted t-to follow you,” she said in a cry. “I was ready t-to leave my family, my p-parents, and my c-country to

follow you.”

She took off her choker, and he took another step back, horrified. His heart sank in his chest. Where the grand, golden choker had been just before was nothing but a large, horrible scar all the way around her throat. After looking for a few seconds, he realized it wasn't a large scar, but dozens of long scars, left in the same spot. As if her throat had been cut open, repeatedly. Cessilia's hand came to touch her throat, briefly, as if to remember it herself. "I t-ried to c-come," she muttered, "b-but C-..."

She stuttered that letter several times, as if it was too painful to pronounce. After a while, she took a deep breath, and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

"C-... Cece and I d-didn't make it."

Ashen's dark eyes couldn't leave the sight of those scars. He was horrified, mortified. His years on the battlefield were more than enough to know this was not the result of any ferocious beast or accident. Those were the clear, clean cuts only a proper blade could make. He slowly shook his head, unable to understand.

"No," he muttered. "It can't be. You... your brother took you home, to the castle. You didn't... come..."

"I really wanted t-to," Cessilia cried, brushing her long curls back. "I wanted t-to, Ashen. I d-didn't even th-think much

b-before I left. I knew my p-parents would be mad, b-but I d-didn't want to b-be separated from you. When I understood my ddad and my b-brothers made you leave the c-country, and we d-didn't even g-get to say g-goodbye, I c-couldn't bear it. I ccried, and I p-panicked. I knew you'd b-be waiting for me, I wasn't ready t-to let you g-go at all."

Ashen couldn't even believe what he was hearing. The younger Cessilia hadn't left him. Worse, she had tried to join

him, when all those years he had thought she had made the opposite choice. He had seen her being taken home, without a word, by her brother, but he had never expected the thirteen-year-old girl had really left the safety of her home to come and find him...

Now, he was scared to hear what had befallen her because of that decision.

"What happened...?"

Cessilia took a deep breath and swallowed with difficulty. She had a hard time breathing, let alone speaking. She was struggling and kept crying silently, brushing her hair back nervously, with her trembling fingers. As much as he wanted to run and comfort her, Ashen felt like he had no right to. Not until he heard it all. There was this invisible barrier between them, something he couldn't cross, and his legs wouldn't take him there. The Princess glanced at the fire. She had been avoiding his gaze since that heavy piece of gold had fallen to the floor.

"I was c-captured midway," she muttered, "c-close to the b-border. Th-three men appeared, g-grabbed me, and p-pinned

me d-down... My d-dragon t-ried to attack them t-to defend me, but th-they used me as a shield. One of th-them... c-cut me, just once. B-but when they realized d-dragon scales appeared on my b-body, and my d-dragon was affected t-too, they used it as a way t-to control her."

She shivered. Her face had gone white, as if she was going to be sick just from remembering this. Ashen finally took a step forward, raising his hand and wanting to at least touch her, but Cessilia wrapped her arms around herself and took a step back. She shook her head slowly.

"I... I c-can't remember how many t-times they d-did this. Every t-time I healed, th-they would cut my th-throat again, t-to scare her... t-to scare my Cece. Th-they wanted t-to c-capture her, b-but d-dragons only ob-bey their owner, so th-they forced her t-to obey th-through me. I b-... I b-bled so much... I p-passed out several t-times."

Ashen's nails were digging deep cuts into his palm from the anger. The Cessilia in front of him looked completely helpless, and he couldn't bear to imagine what she had gone through. He couldn't believe she had been tortured, and so young.

Not only her but her dragon as well. Dragons were like their human's counterpart. If Cessilia was hurt, Cece must have been going through the same pain her owner did...

"D-dragons... share th-their energy and strength with th-their owner when th-they are injured. I d-don't really know how

it c-can be, b-but... th-that's why our s-scales are... the same c-color as theirs."

Cessilia closed her eyes, frowning and looking like she was reliving that pain all over again.

"I... I b-begged th-them t-to stop," she cried. "I... I felt my d-dra-... I felt my Cece was in t-too much p-pain to save me...

she c-couldn't t-take it. Her th-throat had b-begun to b-bleed too, without even a c-cut there."

Ashen was just as shocked. Dragon scales were amongst the thickest materials, most blades couldn't cut through them.

Yet, Cessilia's dragon's throat had begun to bleed as a response to what its master was going through... and how much it tried

to save her. How long had those two been tortured? He couldn't even imagine the scene. Ashen had known Cece, and he had

always seen them together. The dragon was a reflection of its owner. Beautiful, graceful, kind, and strong. Cece was

completely devoted to Cessilia, those two were like one soul in two different bodies. He couldn't even bear to imagine the

scene... the horror they had suffered, to try and save the other.

Cessilia covered her eyes with her palms, trying to calm down her tears, but it was all in vain. She couldn't stop

crying, big tears flowing out now, her shoulders shaking.

"She... D-Dad c-came t-too late," she cried. "My d-dad and b-brothers found us b-both and k-killed those men, b-but..."

Cece was already... she d-didn't move at all. I c-cried. I p-passed out, I had lost t-too much b-blood and my th-throat wasn't healing anymore b-because..."

Because she didn't have Cece's power anymore. Cessilia's Dragon Blood couldn't keep up with the injury, meaning

she had been left to bleed out like a normal human being. Ashen's eyes fell on the scars again, a horrible sight he couldn't look

away from. There were so many scars on top of one another. Perhaps twenty, or thirty... he couldn't even tell. They were all

spread out around her throat on the front half, showing how repeatedly Cessilia had been sliced there. If those were the results

of when Cece couldn't share her pain to heal her, this meant this was only a portion of what she had really endured...

Ashen's legs gave out under him. The White King fell down to his knees, shocked and crushed. He had no idea. All

these years, he had only felt sorry for himself and regretted a thousand times Cessilia not being by his side. But she had tried to

be. The reckless, enamored, thirteen-year-old girl she was, had been ready to give up everything to follow him, and what had

she gotten in return? Torture and pain, a tremendous, unmeasurable amount of pain. Ashen couldn't even breathe, choked up by

his guilt. Nothing was as he thought. Cessilia had said it before: he only felt sorry for himself. He only realized that now. He

had held on to that dream where Cessilia was growing happily, surrounded by her family's love and free of any hardships,

when in truth, she had lost so much already. Her dragon, and her voice.

Cessilia's hand moved down to touch her scars with trembling fingers.

"My mom t-tried to save me... She spent many d-days healing me, c-comforting me. We t-temporarily left the north and

the Onyx C-Castle t-to stay at the Imperial P-Palace. I c-couldn't talk... My th-throat hurt so much, I c-couldn't utter a sound for

nearly t-two years. I g-got d-depressed from seeing my siblings' d-dragons, so I spent more t-time with T-Tessa... or with my ggrandmother.

I got b-better with t-time... After th-that, and my th-throat had healed, it b-became clear I was healed here, bbut..."

Cessilia sighed, and let her hands fall to her sides, shaking her head slowly.

"I c-can't... forgive myself b-because I lost Cece. I was t-too selfish and d-dumb. My d-dragon d-died b-because of

me... and for a while, I c-couldn't get any scars."

Cessilia suddenly opened her hands, showing her palms. For a second, Ashen was confused, until he saw the cuts that

followed the natural lines.

"B-because we c-couldn't understand what happened to my d-dragon or save her with our own ways, D-Dad let KKrai

t-take her to the D-Dragon's Lake, in the Imperial P-Palace... Th-there's a legend th-that a D-Dragon God used to live ththere, with immense p-power that c-could even resuscitate p-people. My p-parents b-believe in th-that legend... At first, I really hoped it c-could work. When K-Krai p-put my Cece in the lake, she d-drowned, but a few d-days later, I b-began ggrowing scales again when I was injured. I k-kept... injuring myself, t-to see if my scales would t-turn another c-color than bblack, but..."

Ashen understood. If Cece was to come back alive, the scales would have taken Cessilia's dragon's real color...

however, it had been five years now. He had seen her scales, still as dark as coal...

Cessilia sighed, shaking her head. She

looked a bit calmer now, but her fingers were still trembling, and she didn't even try to wipe the tears off her face.

"I c-can't... heal like th-the others d-do," she confessed. "T-Tessa is very p-protective of me b-because she knows ththat.

I have those b-black scales, b-but... it's nothing like b-before."

She sighed, shaking her head.

"My voice... I c-can't speak like b-before either. Mother says it's a c-condition that's in my heart, not my th-throat. I just c-can't... I c-can't speak like b-before."

"It's alright."

Ashen jumped back to his feet. He couldn't feel sorry for himself, not anymore. He didn't want to show Cessilia any

more of that, any more of that self-pity, when she was the one truly in pain, the one who had endured all those hardships alone.

He approached her and, very carefully, after seeing that she wouldn't reject his touch, he gently put his hands around her neck,

on the sides of her scars. He glared at them, wishing he could wipe it off, and all the terrible memories behind it. He took a

deep breath and looked up at Cessilia, his thumb rubbing the tears off her jawline gently.

"It's alright, Cessilia, I... I am so, so sorry for what you went through. I'm really... sorry."

She raised her big green eyes at him, and Ashen felt his heart falling.

"If... If I had known," he muttered, "I wouldn't have asked you to follow me. Not... I didn't realize. I was young,

arrogant, and... blinded by my feelings for you. I had this stupid idea that you and I, we could do it together. I didn't even

consider you were too young and too fragile to endure this. When I got back, and I got thrown into war once more... Several

times, I regretted not having you with me, and at the same, I felt thankful you were far from this hell. I... I really had no idea..."

Cessilia put her hands on his and shook her head.

"Th-that was my mistake, Ashen... I d-didn't listen to my p-parents. I was b-blind too. I just th-thought about how bbrutally

we were separated, and... I just wanted t-to see you, even if it-t was only one last t-time."

For a few seconds, the two of them remained silent, just staring at each other with complex feelings. Now that everything between them was out in the open, it felt like a fresh wind had been blown, bringing something a bit new to their relationship. Something a bit exciting, and different. The warmth of the fire and Ashen's hands on her skin were starting to get to Cessilia. She could feel the gentleness in his fingers, and in his dark eyes, read the tormented King's thoughts. He looked torn apart, staring at her with regret, guilt, and adoration. He wasn't good at hiding his emotions from her, and right now, she could easily read his bittersweet feeling, the sour expression he was making while caressing her wet cheeks.

Cessilia leaned forward, hoping for a kiss, but Ashen suddenly pulled back. He was still holding her neck, cupped in his hands, but he had stepped back right away, with an almost frightened expression.

"Ashen..."

"I... I c-can't, Cessilia," he muttered. "I can't ask you to stay with me."

"No," she declared strongly before he could add a word to that. "N-No. D-don't p-push me away b-because you p-pity me."

"I don't pity you!" he protested. "I am responsible for what happened to you, Cessilia! I... I have just thrown my anger at you since you came, when I had no reason to! I had no idea what you went through, and I just acted like... like the selfcentered bastard I am! How can I even dare to keep you with me now? I—"

"Ashen!"

She grabbed his face, angrily staring at him and forcing him to look at her.

"I c-came here," she said. "I chose t-to see you again, and I d-don't regret it. D-despite what happened t-to me, I still regretted that I c-couldn't see you. I... I missed the b-boy I fell in love with b-back then. I... I missed you t-too. D-don't ddecide what is b-better for me now, or what you c-can do or not. Things are d-different now. I am an adult, and I c-came here b-because I really wanted t-to. When Yassim c-came and said you needed a q-queen, I knew I had t-to come."

She let out a long sigh and lowered her hands to his exposed torso, her fingers lingering on the long lines of his scars.

The King calmed down a little, and gently moved his hands down to her shoulders, holding her gently.

"I understand... you have b-been through many hardships t-too," she whispered. "My d-dad made you leave when you were only sevent-teen, still a b-boy... I d-don't want t-to say I am the only one who g-got through hardships, I know t-things

were d-different here. I t-talked a lot with Nana too, and she t-told me about it... P-plus, I know you c-could have k-killed ththose men without even a fight. I'm sure th-that woman knows p-poisons th-that c-could have spared you a fight, b-but you d-didn't choose that."

She smiled, a bit weakly given the circumstances, but she didn't want to hang on to those heavy feelings in her heart.

She wished it could be blown away, like the rain and wind battering against the windows. She touched the tips of Ashen's silver-white hair.

"So it t-turned c-completely white after all," she muttered. "It's p-pretty. I like it."

He covered her hand with his.

"...So you really still have feelings for me?"

Cessilia nodded.

"You th-thought I d-didn't?"

"I don't know... I was scared," he muttered. "Each time I had found peace, it ended up slipping through my fingers

again. I don't think I'll be able to handle it if I lose you a second time."

"...You won't," she whispered.

Cessilia sighed, and took a step forward, nestling against Ashen's torso. After a hesitation, he wrapped his arms around

her, and tightly embraced her. She closed her eyes, feeling Ashen's moist, hot sigh against her temple. He cradled her head

while she leaned on his shoulder, his fingers softly grasping her brown curls. The two of them stood like this, by the fire,

hugging each other in silence. They didn't even need to kiss. Right now, all Cessilia wanted was Ashen's smell surrounding

her, his strong but gentle arms, and the quietness of being just the two of them in this room.

After a while, she felt him move, and he lifted her up, carrying her to the bed. Cessilia didn't resist at all, even as he sat

her on the edge of the mattress, and with one knee down, helped her get rid of her shoes, very gently. She couldn't help but

grimace when her ankle moved.

"Are you alright?" he asked, concerned.

"I th-think I b-broke my left ankle, b-but it d-doesn't hurt anymore. It will b-be healed by tomorrow morning."

Ashen nodded, visibly satisfied. Then, he stood up and grabbed a clean piece of clothing to give her. Cessilia frowned

while receiving it. It was clearly a man's tunic, much too long for her.

"For you to change into," he said. "You'll get sick if you sleep in these clothes, and... I don't really trust my self-control

if you end up naked."

Just as he said that, he took off his own shoes, deliberately looking away. Cessilia tilted her head, a bit intrigued. He

really wasn't going to peek at all? She felt a bit dejected and a bit happy at the same time. Although they were going to spend the night together, it seemed like the King was resolute on really only sleeping together... She chuckled but changed into that piece of clothing anyway. The truth was, she had never been naked in front of a man, and felt nervous, even if Ashen really was turning away from her. Not only that, but a part of her was somewhat jealous of all those women who had done things with him in this bed before...

When he finally turned back and came to join her, Cessilia was still frowning at his side of the bed.

"What is it...? Do you want me to change the bedding?" he frowned.

"I d-don't like it," she muttered. "You've s-slept with other women here..."

"I haven't."

Cessilia frowned as he lay next to her, facing her in the bed. They were just a few inches away from each other, but

Ashen didn't try to get any closer, sticking to his side of the bed as if he was worried about crossing some invisible border. He

chuckled, facing her. In the darkness behind the bed's curtains, he looked even more mysterious, while his white hair had golden reflections from the fire.

"I've... had sex with many women, but not in this bed. I can't stand sleeping with someone else in the same room...

unless it's that thirteen-year-old girl who'd sneak into my bed under the cover of night."

It took Cessilia a short while to realize, and a faint smile appeared on her face. She moved her body, confidently laying

against him, and Ashen laid out his arm for her with a sigh. He wrapped her in his embrace, rubbing his cheek against her hair.

"You haven't changed much," he muttered to himself.

Meanwhile, Cessilia had a faint smile on, and closed her eyes, feeling a bit better now.

Chapter 12

Cessilia woke up very slowly to the feeling of someone caressing her arm. Gentle fingers brushed back and forth over

her skin, so faintly it was like the wind's soft caress. She smiled and closed her eyes again for a few seconds. She felt good...

Her body was still somewhat heavy from everything that happened the previous night, her throat a bit sore and the skin around

her eyes a bit dry, but she felt fine. The warm blanket covering her lower body was a perfect balance with the soft, gentle

breeze on her skin. She let out a faint breath, opening her eyes again, and turned around to face him. Ashen was seated against

the bed's headboard, looking wide awake already, his white hair prettily covering his bare shoulders. From the lighting in the room, still a bit dim, it ought to be quite early.

"...Good morning," he muttered with a smile.

"G-good morning... How c-come you're already awake?" she asked, frowning.

The King sighed and looked away.

“...I think I’m being kept in check.”

Cessilia frowned and turned her head to the window, where his eyes were staring. She realized it was later in the day

than she had thought, but the window was obstructed by a dragon’s head. The large, dark scales that blocked most of the lighting of the room had tricked her. The big red eye looking around, Krai let out a grunt. Next to her, Ashen frowned while glaring back.

“Seriously...”

Unable to hold it anymore, Cessilia giggled and rolled back on the bed to hide her laugh in the pillow. Krai acting like

a chaperone and watching the King in his own bed was so incredibly funny. Just imagining how long those two had been staring

at each other while she slept peacefully, Cessilia just couldn’t stop herself.

“...I love the sound of your laugh.”

Those words calmed her down a little. After a second, Cessilia felt Ashen’s shadow over her and his body. She

stopped laughing, her heartbeat accelerating a little. He left a kiss on her shoulder, sending delicious, warm chills down her

spine. His hand gently caressed her arm, and she felt his body against her, his torso against her back, and his lower half against her butt...

“Do you feel better?” he asked in a whisper.

“Yes...”

She could feel his hot breath against her neck, his fingers moving her chestnut curls out of the way, and soon after, he

left more kisses against her skin. Cessilia blushed a bit, feeling her own body react with delight to this. Not only that, but she could feel Ashen’s body reacting to her too...

An upset growl made them both jump.

“K-Krai!” Cessilia protested, sitting up. “G-go hunt now!”

The dragon growled back, upset, but the Princess kept staring at it.

“I am g-good. Now g-go!”

With a high-pitched growl and a loud ruckus against the stone wall, the dragon finally disappeared from their sight,

probably flying away to hunt its breakfast. Next to her, Ashen sighed, lying back down on the bed and closing his eyes.

“I never thought I’d get cock-blocked by a dragon...”

Cessilia chuckled a bit, but used their positions to enjoy the view of his exposed body...

Now that the sunlight was

filling the room, and he was lying down on the bed, she could see more clearly the lines of his body, making her feel hot all

over again. The White King really was a warrior, and underneath all his scars, there was a muscular, very attractive body for

her to look at. Those scars were covering a lot of the god-like body, though, and each time she saw them, her heart felt a little sad. Cessilia leaned over, and despite feeling a bit shy, she put one of her curls behind her ear and leaned to kiss one of his scars. Ashen shivered underneath her, very faintly, but the King kept his eyes resolutely closed. After a hesitation, Cessilia decided to do it again, picking a different one. This time again, the King's body very visibly reacted to it.

"Cessilia, stop."

"Why? You d-don't like it?"

He groaned, covering his eyes with his arms.

"I watched you sleep for two hours trying to hold back my desire for you. If you do this now, I really won't be able to

hold myself back anymore. So please... don't make it harder than it already is."

Goosebumps appeared on her skin from hearing that. She blushed a bit, and, after trying to lick her dry lips, Cessilia caressed the scar she had just kissed with her fingers.

"M-maybe I... d-don't want you t-to hold yourself back."

The King lowered his arms and opened his eyes wide to stare at her, making Cessilia feel so intimidated again. He sat

up, facing her from very up close all of a sudden. His dark eyes looked so confused, she couldn't decipher his thoughts as he

stared at her silently for a few seconds. Then, his hand gently caressed her cheek, and he took a deep breath in, staring at her

with that very serious expression.

Then, very slowly, he put a gentle, demure kiss on her lips. While she enjoyed his tenderness, Cessilia was left

confused. When their lips parted, she stared at him, a bit at a loss. He looked much calmer now, caressing her cheek and keeping that gentle gaze on her.

"Ashen?"

"Not today, my princess," he muttered.

"B-But..."

"Trust me, it's not that I don't want to," he said to reassure her, caressing her skin once more. "It's just... I love you,

Cessilia. I love you like I don't think I'll ever be able to love anyone in this life. I want to treat you like what you are, the most important and precious person in my life."

"I'm n-not th-that fragile," she retorted.

"I know, Cessi," he chuckled, "but you're probably still injured and not fully recovered from last night, and... and

frankly speaking, I don't think I would be able to be gentle with you if we had sex now. I just... want to wait until it's perfect, alright?"

However, Cessilia wasn't happy with that response. She pushed him away from her cheek with the back of her hand, a

bit annoyed, glaring at him with her fierce green eyes.

"You d-don't want to have s-sex with m-me b-but you t-told me about all th-those many other women you s-slept with already. I hate b-being the only one you c-can't have sex with! I'm not a g-girl anymore, and I am f-fine! D-do I have t-to be the only one t-to wait?"

Ashen sighed, shaking his head.

"I'm the only one who deserves to wait," he said. "I wouldn't think twice about sleeping with another woman because, as cold-hearted as that makes me, I don't care about them. I don't care about them as I do about you, and that's exactly why I just... I can't bring myself to do it with you. I don't want to just have sex with you, Cessilia, I want to properly make love to you. It is not the same thing. You're the only woman I want to make love to."

"B-but..."

"Cessi."

He smiled, and gently brought her hand to his lips. One by one, he softly kissed each of her fingers, making Cessilia's stomach tickle and her cheeks blush again. How could he do this, when he wasn't going to make love to her? She wasn't sure how to feel about this. It was true her body hadn't fully recuperated from the events of the previous night, but it didn't make much of a difference in her desire for Ashen. She was a virgin, but she knew how sex was supposed to happen, her mother and aunt had both educated her on that as soon as she had become a woman.

"...I love you," he muttered.

Cessilia felt her heart melting. Not only at his words but at the way those dark onyx eyes seized her soul, making her feel so awfully confident in his feelings. She had experienced all sorts of things since she had come to his Kingdom, but her target, her main objective, had always been Ashen's heart. Now that he was giving it to her, she felt so awfully shy! Cessilia felt like she was thrown back into the past, into that enamored thirteen-year-old girl who thought she knew it all about love and what she wanted. She felt torn apart.

"It's not only that," he added in a whisper. "Last night was... a lot, for the two of us." His eyes went down to her throat, and Cessilia covered it right away with her hand, remembering her exposed scar.

However, Ashen gently took her hand away, to stare at it more.

"I... I don't deserve you, right now," he muttered.

"Ashen! Ashen, th-that's not--"

"I know," he said, "but it is still... I was unfair to you, Cessi. At least... Let me properly apologize to you first. Don't let me be more of a dirtbag than I already am by forgiving me too fast. I know I was wrong, and... I want to earn back your trust, and my own."

Just as he said those words, Cessilia felt something leave her heart. It felt as if it flew off, and... freed something inside.

She let out a faint sigh, calming down from her previous anger all at once. Ashen wasn't rejecting her. In fact, he wanted to make things right instead... to repair what had been so badly broken between them. She lowered her head. She was really a bit too impatient when it came to him, wasn't she? She suddenly remembered how her father was, with her mom. Her grandmother had talked about this too. How dragons were possessive creatures... Cessilia slowly nodded, more for herself than for Ashen.

"I... und-derstand," she muttered.

"Thank you."

He said that with a smile, and gently kissed her hand again. Sitting opposite each other like this on the bed, Cessilia

found herself a bit shy, even more so when she remembered she was only wearing one of Ashen's tunics... She pulled the blanket over her legs a little, feeling embarrassed all of a sudden.

"...Cessilia, I'm also worried about what will happen once... I make my interest, no, my feelings toward you clear."

She looked up at him again, feeling his serious tone all of a sudden. Ashen was still holding her hand, but his eyes had gone a bit darker, and he seemed determined.

"Those people will stop at nothing to get me to do what they want. Last night's murder attempt is only a sample of what they could do. I tried to avoid putting you in their sight, but..."

"Is th-that why you never t-tried to t-talk to me in p-public?"

"...That was one of the reasons, yes," he nodded. "Those lords all want me to do what will serve their tribe better. I

know some are rather inoffensive like the niece of Counselor Yamino you're always with, but some won't hesitate to murder their rivals to become my Queen."

"You th-think I would let anyone else b-become your Q-Queen?" Cessilia angrily asked.

"No! I'm worried about your security, not you losing this stupid competition!"

Cessilia sighed, and sat at the edge of the bed, away from him. She brushed her long hair a bit with her fingers, shaking her head.

"I want t-to win th-this c-competition, Ashen."

"Do you think I could choose any other woman than you?" he exclaimed, shocked.

Cessilia shook her head, and stood up, walking up to a little table where clean clothes had been left out for a woman.

She found clean underwear, a dark pink dress, and a pair of comfortable shoes.

"No, b-but I was serious when I t-told those vixens I would p-play by the rules. Th-this is not j-just about me and you.

Those p-people represent your citizens, Ashen. If I want t-to b-become their queen, I c-can't just force them to t-trust me. I

already know at least a few of th-them are willing to see what I c-can do, who I c-can p-prove t-to be. ...C-can you t-turn around, p-please?"

He sighed but turned around. Cessilia began changing quickly, a bit shy as he was right next to her, but she trusted he wouldn't dare peek.

"I am t-tired of only b-being the War God's d-daughter. Th-those women hate me b-because they think th-that's all I am.

A rich D-Dragon Master. B-but I d-don't really have a d-dragon anymore... and I d-don't want to b-be a fraud."

"Cessilia, you're not a fraud. Just because you lost Cece doesn't mean you're anything less than... those women."

"I know, b-but I have to p-prove it."

She sighed, finished changing, and turned around. She walked up to the bed, where Ashen, hearing her come, turned around to face her, sitting on the edge of the mattress with a confused expression. Cessilia gently smiled at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I r-realized it when I went t-to the Muram Village," she muttered. "You d-did so much b-by yourself, b-but you really d-do need a queen. Not someone like Jisel, b-but someone who c-can d-do the right things."

"Cessilia, Jisel is not..."

Her sudden, angry expression convinced him to shut up right there. He swallowed his words right back into his throat, while the Princess was glaring at him.

"I d-don't want to know," she hissed. "D-don't t-talk about th-that woman now."

He didn't dare add anything to that. He could have mentioned she had brought up his mistress first, but after seeing

Cessilia's furious, green eyes, so much like her father's when she was upset, he didn't. The young Princess had the eyes of someone who knew how to threaten and uphold it. She had the eyes of a real dragon tamer...

After a few seconds of heavy, guilt-filled silence had passed, Ashen cleared his throat a bit.

"So... You want us to remain a secret for now?" he muttered. "You really want to... do this competition?"

"Yes," she nodded, "b-but I am not l-letting any other wo-woman have you."

"I know," he chuckled. "I swear it's not going to happen... ever again, as long as you're with me. I just... want to look forward to when we can truly be together."

Cessilia nodded and took the initiative to kiss him this time. The King answered her kiss right away, his hands going around her body, caressing her gently. Although they had both agreed on that, she could feel it would be hard to wait... She was

feeling hot just from the gentle caresses on her body, and she regretted not staying in that bed a bit longer.

"Your Majesty?" Someone knocked at the door. "My apologies, Your Majesty, but the Counselors and Lords are waiting for you for the meeting..."

Ashen glared at the door, back to his usual White King cold demeanor. Cessilia chuckled and kissed his cheek gently.

"I'll g-get going first," she whispered. "...D-do you th-think we c-can... see each other again soon?"

He sighed and caressed her hair, staring at her as if he wanted to capture each of her traits in his mind. His fingers

gently followed her curls to their end before he slowly nodded.

"...I'll come to you," he muttered. "Believe me, Cessi... I won't disappoint you again. I promise."

He gently caressed her cheek, making Cessilia feel even better. She nodded, and they kissed once more, a more candid

kiss this time, just enough to say goodbye, although neither of them wanted to part. The King sighed, his fingers still in her hair.

When the servant knocked at the door again, he glared.

"I'm coming!" he shouted, upset. "...You should go out after me. Servants will definitely speculate after I asked for

women's clothes to be brought earlier, but they might not see you if I have them all follow me, so..."

"I d-don't need to g-go out by the d-door," chuckled Cessilia.

She left another quick kiss on his cheek, and this time, slowly stepped back, grabbing the fur coat that had been left on

the chair to wrap it around her. In front of Ashen's shocked eyes, Cessilia climbed up the window until she was on the edge of

it, and gave him a little wink.

"See you t-tonight," she whispered.

The next second, she jumped out. Ashen's heart dropped, but right after, he heard the familiar flap of the wings of a

dragon. So her father's dragon hadn't left after all... He didn't know how to feel about that. Eventually, a smile appeared on his

lips, and he had to hide it with his hand when the servants walked in.

The bold Princess hadn't changed much, after all...

Cessilia landed effortlessly on Krai, but it did remind her that her body was indeed still healing from the previous

night. Maybe Ashen wasn't wrong about waiting a little... She grimaced a bit, and adjusted her position on the dragon's back,

patting its neck.

"Krai, you're g-going to have t-to learn t-to give me some p-personal space now... I need t-to have a life without-t you watching me all the t-time."

The dragon growled a bit, unhappy with the idea. Krai flew off quietly around the castle, taking Cessilia farther away,

over the sea. Since the downpour from the previous night had passed, the waves seemed a bit calmer, letting her enjoy the gentle morning breeze. There were a few boats still at sea, fishermen coming back late from their morning outing. Some let their jaws fall or pointed at the dragon in awe, and to Cessilia's surprise, a few even waved at them, perhaps some of Naptunie's relatives. She smiled back, but they were quickly beyond the fishermen's line of sight, with nothing but sea ahead.

On the dragon's back, she made Krai fly lower so that she could see the sea animals jumping out of the waves, probably unaware of the dangers of a gigantic dragon above them... A couple of unlucky fish found themselves jumping out of the water, never to return after being eaten in one bite.

Cessilia let the dragon eat as it wanted and enjoyed the warmth of the sun and the freshness of the wind on her skin. She loved flying. Her father had taken her to the skies since she was a child to get her used to it, for when her own dragon would be big enough to let her fly on its back... Her heart broke a little each time she remembered Cece. Her dragon would have loved the Eastern Kingdom and its sea...

"K-Krai, let's find T-Tessa and Nana now," she said.

The dragon growled happily, making a little joyful jump in the air, and slowly began to turn around, heading back to the Eastern Kingdom. It looked like the Black Dragon definitely associated Nana's name with the perspective of a yummy little treat... In just a few minutes, they were back above the Eastern Kingdom's Capital. Far ahead, on the horizon, Cessilia could see the very large chain of mountains that made up the border, sometimes replaced by man-made walls. A little nostalgic smile appeared when she thought of her family, and she wondered if her younger siblings missed her. As the eldest sister, she was often the one who helped her mother look after them, and as a result, all the younger ones had grown close to her, especially Sadara, her littlest sister. She missed each of her siblings, as well as her parents, but it was also her first adventure away from them, and she felt a little proud, for someone who had rarely left her family's domain... She was starting to understand her sister Kiera's feelings, as she was constantly running away from familial surveillance.

Krai let out a little growl, and Cessilia looked down. The dragon had already found her cousin and their friend, both waving at her, Sabael with them. They had apparently decided to have breakfast downtown, near the port. The dragon swiftly landed on one of the ports' docks, under all the fishermen's shocked eyes. Krai was larger than any of the boats there, and, although the dragon's front paws got on one of the docks, the lower part of its body was quietly floating, or maybe paddling

underwater. While the large dragon curiously sniffed the closest stalls, Cessilia jumped off its back, Nana and Tessa running to her.

“Lady Cessilia!” exclaimed Nana, all smiles. “How are you? Are you feeling better? I am so glad His Majesty came to our rescue yesterday... Oh, good morning, Sir Dragon!”

“G-good morning, Nana. I’m alright, th-thank you. How about you g-guys? D-did you get back safely?”

Now that she saw them, Cessilia realized she had no idea about what had happened to her friends after the attack last

night, and felt awfully guilty about it. Luckily, they seemed fine, although she spotted some green scales on Tessa’s arms and a bandage on Nana’s shoulder. Her cousin sighed.

“We’re fine,” she said. “Looks like those people were targeting you more than us, Sab and I had no trouble getting rid of them, it just took a while... We tried to capture some of them, but they committed suicide.”

“We think they were hired,” grumbled Sabael, his eyes on the dragon. “They had common mercenary tattoos on their bodies. I put in a request at the Guild, but I doubt those who hired them had a proper contract. We found some money on several of them.”

“Which we confiscated, of course,” added Tessa with a cunning smile, “which is why we’re having a victory feast this morning... Have you eaten, Cessi?”

Cessilia could tell her cousin’s question was not as light-hearted as it seemed, as Tessa was tilting her head with an

accusatory look. She blushed, realizing her cousin was definitely going to roast her for spending the night with a man, and the

King himself, no less... To avoid Tessandra’s stare, she turned to Nana, who was already convincing one of her uncles or cousins to feed the dragon before Krai helped itself.

“I’m s-sorry for leaving you, N-Nana, especially when you c-came b-back for me...”

“Oh no, don’t worry! It’s not like I was of much use anyway... I am sorry I couldn’t help much, and glad we all made it back safely...”

Cessilia sighed but walked up to her to hug the young lady, who happily hugged her back. When they parted, she could

see that Naptunie’s expression was a bit serious, the young lady frowning.

“You know, Lady Cessilia, I’ve decided. I always wanted to become a scholar, but I really wasn’t sure what kind. From

now on, I will work hard to become a Royal Counselor, like my uncle. I hope you will become Queen, so I can keep helping

you and advising you this way! I may not be a fighter, but I have confidence in my knowledge!”

“Th-thank you, Nana,” said Cessilia, smiling. “You will b-be an amazing c-counselor.”

The young lady blushed, smiling widely and visibly proud of Cessilia's comment. "Oh, what do you want to eat?" she asked. "We're having some of my cousin's herbal soup and of course some buns, but I can ask for more for you!"

Cessilia let Nana take her to the market, while Krai stayed behind, its tail making little waves in the water, very happy to be fed by the curious fishermen. For a while, Cessilia was only too happy to eat what she was given and chat about the soup's rumored healing properties and ingredients; however, it was hard to ignore her cousin's intense, suspicious stare on her all the while. Tessandra was following closely, her arms crossed and her lips pinched in a pout that reminded her of their grandmother on bad days...

After a while, they finally found a little spot to sit in the open market. Cessilia had noticed the girls had chosen more practical clothes than their usual dresses today. Tessandra was wearing a long, red, double-slitted skirt and a fitted top, while Nana was wearing a flowy and colored romper, with a cute, matching ribbon around her neck and flat shoes. Even Sabael was wearing his full armor today, all in dark leather and metal, which made him stand out in the middle of the market. Had they decided to be a bit more cautious, in case something else happened? Cessilia noticed how Nana seemed to glance to the side from time to time, as if she was wary of someone watching them, and Tessandra kept her hand on her sword.

"...I'm s-sorry ab-bout what happened," she finally said after finishing her meal. "It was my d-decision to g-go outside of the C-Capital again and I p-put you all in d-danger."

"Cessi, I also came here to protect you," sighed Tessandra. "Plus, you were the target, it's not your fault. We need to

find whoever hired those mercenaries and make them pay for trying to kill you."

"Any of the strong families could have ordered this," said Nana with an upset expression. "Mercenaries are expensive, and there were so many of them too... It has to be one of the other candidates."

"They also had enough power to bribe the guards," groaned her brother. "Not many families are that powerful. I

reported those men to our headquarters, so there will be an investigation. Hiring mercenaries is one thing, but bribing guards is another. I have never seen those guys before either, so they might have been new hires..."

"I say the next time the Royal Guards don't let us in, we fight our way through," declared Tessa with a bitter look.

Sabael frowned at her.

"You can't do that..."

"Why not? We played by the rules and had our papers in order, and we couldn't get in! I hate corrupt officials. If this

was the Dragon Empire, they would—”

“This is not the Dragon Empire,” Sabael retorted. “Can you resolve anything without using your sword?”

“You’re the one with full-on armor right now!”

“I am a Royal Guard.”

“You’re off-duty, love.”

Cessilia and Nana exchanged knowing glances. They were now both used to those two arguing back and forth about

Tessandra’s quick temper, and it was obvious Sabael was getting much better at handling it too. For a while, they watched as

the two of them bickered about the laws and punishments for corruption while drinking their soup in silence. Cessilia loved

this a lot. The four of them, like any group of friends in the bay, having breakfast in the open air and tasting new things. Leaving

her brother and Tessa to their argument, Nana sat a bit closer to Cessi.

“I am just so glad that His Majesty arrived, Lady Cessilia. I don’t know what I would have done if anything really bad

happened to you... I was a bit curious, ahem... You didn’t come back to the suite last night... Where, uh, did you...?”

Cessilia blushed a bit. It couldn’t be helped that she would get questioned, but unfortunately, Nana’s whispering didn’t

escape Tessandra’s ears. She lifted a finger to interrupt Sab and turned to her with a frown.

“Cessi?”

“I was with the K-King all night...”

“Oh my!” squealed Nana, covering her mouth with her hands, excited.

Opposite her, both Tessa and Sabael’s jaws dropped, staring at her with blank expressions.

“Seriously, Cessi?!” her cousin exclaimed. “Are you mad? You spent the night with the King? After everything that

happened, you really think that was a good time to—”

“We d-didn’t d-do anything!” Cessilia protested, blushing. “We really d-didn’t... We j-just slept t-together, nothing else

hap-happened...”

She was even more embarrassed as her stuttering was made worse by stress, which felt like a confession in itself.

Tessa clicked her tongue, a noise that made the siblings jump, but her eyes were on Cessilia, with a suspicious stare.

“...He really did nothing?” she insisted.

“N-nothing... I was hurt t-too... I j-just left th-this morning b-before anyone saw me. We th-thought it would b-be best tto

k-keep it a secret...”

“Oh my gosh,” squealed Nana, all excited. “This is like one of those romance stories!

The Princess runs off through the

window so no one knows she’s the King’s secret lover... So romantic!”

"No, no, Nana," said Tessa. "That is not romantic, this is very dangerous and very bad behavior, Cessi!"

"I'm t-telling you we d-didn't d-do anything!" protested Cessilia.

"You better not! I don't want to have to explain that to those crazy, overprotective brothers of yours... Let alone your father!"

"I'm an adult n-now! P-plus it's n-not like you c-can lecture me! Even if I d-did something, th-there's nothing wrong with th-that!"

Tessandra rolled her eyes and leaned back in her chair.

"I agree that the King gets brownie points for not touching you when you were injured.

And I get that there is something

between you, I'm not that blind. ...But he is still the King, with a major anger management issue and about a dozen harpies, all

lurking around trying to get their claws into him! What if they find out that you're his new mistress? We already almost died last night, Cessi!"

"T-Tessa, I c-can't just b-back off and p-push him away b-because of th-those women. I d-don't want t-to. Ashen and I

t-talked a lot last n-night, and we c-cleared some th-things up."

"Oh yeah, like the fact that he kept a woman, who just happens to resemble you, by his side?"

Cessilia glared back, annoyed to be reminded of Jisel. That was one topic both she and Ashen had avoided, and for

good reason. From what they had heard and seen the previous night, she had understood those two had something more

complex going on than a simple sexual relationship. Someone as cunning as Jisel probably didn't really stay around with no

prospect of becoming queen without expecting anything else in return...

"See?" said Tessandra. "You haven't solved everything yet, so don't trust that guy too soon, Cessilia. I know you're an

adult, and I can't keep you from sleeping with guys either, but I want to warn you about sleeping with guys who will turn out to be douches."

"I kn-know Ashen..."

"Are you sure about that? Because all I've seen so far is a self-centered King who can only make one facial expression, and it's not an inviting one!"

Cessilia sighed and crossed her arms without responding. She didn't like when

Tessandra acted like this, lecturing her

like an older sister. Next to them, Nana looked uneasy, nervously peeling off her bun's layers while glancing back and forth

between the two of them, before settling her gaze on Tessandra.

"Lady Tessa... D-do you mean you have experience with boys...?"

"I do," said Tessa with a smile. "Not just with boys, actually. I mean, I was probably an early bloomer, mostly to piss

off my mom... Not that I wouldn't have done it either way though. Women in our family educate us pretty early on, but I just had to be the rebellious one of the bunch, I guess!"

"Oh my..."

"...You've n-never had a b-boyfriend, Nana?" asked Cessilia.

"No! I mean... I have had a couple of crushes, but I'm known as a boring dork..."

Besides, all my sisters and cousins are prettier than me, so I feel like I'm better off reading books and dreaming about romance than getting my hopes up in real life..."

"Th-that's not t-true, you're really p-pretty!" protested Cessilia.

"It's nice of you, Lady Cessi," blushed Nana, "but I've decided I should be patient and wait for someone who will

really like me rather than be too hopeful... I'm fine marrying a nice man, really!"

"I'm s-sure you will find the b-best partner."

"Me too! I mean, I will completely support your secret romance story!"

The two of them smiled at each other, feeling like they were allies in love, and could understand each other's feelings

well in this moment. Tessandra chuckled.

"You two are so cute," she said. "So innocent too. Not that I wish you to have any bad experiences!"

While she spoke, all three girls became aware of Sabael, who had been staring at Tessandra for a while now with a

puzzled, complex expression. Tessandra blushed a bit, brushing her hair back playfully.

"What is it? Dazzled by me?" she chuckled.

"You... have experience with boys?" he asked.

His tone and frown sent a cold chill across the table. Cessilia and Nana exchanged a look, a bit worried all of a sudden.

"Sab," muttered Nana. "You..."

"Is there a problem with that?" retorted Tessandra, suddenly defensive. "Did you expect me to be a virgin? Are you disappointed?"

"...And with girls too?"

Cessilia felt a bit worried for her cousin. She could see Tessandra's expression slowly sinking, and she very visibly

tightened her fist on the table. From Sabael's shocked expression and the silent anger rising, this was not going to end well...

Next to her, Nana looked just as worried, and desperate to de-escalate the situation between them.

"S-Sabael, don't be like this... Lady Tessa and Cessilia are from a different culture, of course they have different experiences..."

"If you have a problem with me not being a virgin and also being attracted to girls, you can say it right here and now,

Sab," snapped Tessa. "I'm not going to apologize or feel sorry for my past. That's what it is and I am not changing it!"

The Royal Guard remained mute, staring at her with a stunned expression. It would probably have been less awkward if they actually began to fight, but because he wasn't saying anything, both Cessilia and Naptunie had no idea what to do. They could tell Tessandra was furious, and that closed fist was not a good sign, either, but she was also waiting for him to speak his mind. Despite her temper, Cessilia knew her cousin wouldn't be the one to get physical unless the situation really called for it...

"Sorry," suddenly said Sabael, standing up from his chair. "I... I think I need to be alone for a while."

Without adding a word, he quickly left their group and walked away, not even glancing back once. Tessandra, who had obviously been prepared for a proper dispute, turned to the other two.

"...What the heck was that?!"

Both Cessilia and Nana were equally at a loss as well. Nana looked the most surprised and worried, shaking her head.

"I really don't know," she muttered. "I've never seen Sab react like that or look so upset..."

"...Is it really because I'm not a virgin?" Tessandra frowned. "It can't be, right? He must have had a few girlfriends, no? At least one or two...?"

She turned to Naptunie, who was slowly shaking her head, looking almost sorry.

"I don't think so," she mumbled. "Not that I know of..."

"Are you kidding?" exclaimed Tessa. "With those looks of his?"

"I d-definitely thought he was p-popular as well," muttered Cessilia.

"Oh, he is! But I've never seen him interested in other girls before. I know of at least four or five of my sisters' and cousins' friends that he rejected completely... Lady Tessandra is the first one I have ever seen him close with!"

"I did have to force my way in a bit..." scoffed Tessandra.

"Sab focused a lot on becoming a soldier and Royal Guard," said Nana. "He really spent all his time training for the past few years, even now..."

"You tend to be a bit... very single-hobby-focused in your family, don't you?" sighed Tessa. "...Do you think that's what this is about, then? Because I'm not inexperienced? Or because I've been with girls? ...Or both?"

"I really don't know... I mean, we do have a... uh... traditional view of relationships in our family, but it's not that shocking either if people have relationships before marriage..."

Tessandra sighed, clearly upset by this.

"Well, I can't change what has been done," she pouted, "and if he's not fine with it, that's it. I hate guys who think

women have to be virgins for them, and that they are sluts if not! I grew up with strong, independent women who did not wait

for marriage, and it didn't make them any worse or better than others. They are even stronger! If he wants a cute, shy girlfriend, well, it won't be me! He's just an idiot for pushing his standards on me!"

"T-Tessa, it might not b-be what you th-think it is..."

"What is it, then?! You saw his reaction!"

Naptunie and Cessilia exchanged another look, but they had no response to that. It was hard to understand Sabael's

thought process when he hadn't said a thing... He didn't look disgusted or anything, just shocked, and he had walked away without saying anything on the matter.

"Should we just go?" suggested Naptunie. "All those... words we used got us some attention..."

Indeed, Tessandra hadn't been very discreet during her heated speech, and several people around were glancing at the three girls with suspicious looks.

"Fine," said Tessa, jumping to her feet. "I'm done eating, anyway, and I need to do something or I'll keep thinking about it and it will annoy me even more."

She quickly walked away and threw the leftovers of their breakfast to Krai. Cessilia felt a bit sorry for her cousin as

she watched her scold the dragon and send it away. Things really weren't simple when it came to love... Next to her, Nana leaned in to whisper something.

"So... we should probably avoid going near the Royal Guards' quarters today? Sab tends to go there and train when he's upset..."

"I th-think so t-too," nodded Cessilia.

When Tessa came back, Krai flying off in the distance, they quickly did their best to change the subject. In fact, Nana

began by telling Cessilia all about how they had quickly gone back to the castle the previous night and had eaten with the

Counselors while getting warmed up in the room prepared for Tessandra. From

Naptunie's recount, Cessilia understood her

brother hadn't accompanied them to the castle, but had immediately gone back to the quarters instead. Nana was smart to

carefully avoid mentioning her brother, though, and made her explanation quick and fluid. Then, it was Cessilia's turn. She

summarized in her own words her evening and night with the King, although she left out all the details she felt shy about.

Following this, and once they were out of reach of any opportunistic ears, she quickly explained to Naptunie and Tessandra

about their past relationship, including her scar, and how her dragon had been lost.

Tessandra knew about most of it except for

Ashen's relationship with Cessi, but by the end of it, Naptunie was weeping.

"I can't believe this..." she kept crying. "This is so beautiful and sad at the same time..."

That you two were separated

because you were from different countries... And what happened to your dragon... And your scar... Oh, god, it's better than any romance book I've read but it's too many emotions for me."

Cessilia touched her scar. She still felt a bit embarrassed about it, but she had decided it was time she stopped hiding

it. She had retrieved her choker before leaving Ashen's room, and worn it all morning, but now that she had taken it off to show

Nana, she didn't want to put it back on. That piece of gold felt heavy in her hands, and she felt like it had been keeping her from

breathing right for too long now. Strangely, she felt a lot more free now that she wasn't hiding her scar anymore. It was quite

ugly and still got her stares from passersby, but her skin color would get her stares anyway, and she didn't care about what

others thought of it either.

"I'm sorry I d-didn't t-tell you everything sooner," she muttered, looking at Tessa. "I th-think t-talking with Ashen

helped me a b-bit to p-put things b-back where they b-belonged..."

"I get it," sighed Tessandra. "I'm just glad if it makes you feel better now... I remember the state you were in after

everything happened, and I know the only thing that mattered was to get you better, not just physically. You didn't talk for so

long... I was just glad when I got to hear my best friend's voice and see you laugh again. Your mom and mine had told me a

hundred times not to pry too much, and I already had a rough idea of what had happened anyway. When we got here, I kind of

figured the King might have been... somehow linked."

"So... His Majesty didn't actually die, but lived in the Dragon Empire?" whispered Nana.

Cessilia nodded. They were wandering in one of the streets right next to the sea, not too crowded at this hour. Naptunie

was taking them to the Apothecary in the northeastern part of the Capital, as she had promised Cessilia before, taking a nice long way around.

"He was f-found near the m-mountains," Cessilia explained. "He was in th-the snow n-near the b-border, half-d-dead..."

Mother said his hair had p-probably s-started to t-turn white d-due to a c-combined effect from p-poisons and stress."

"Poison?" exclaimed Nana. "I knew there were many assassination attempts, but..."

"It was," Cessilia nodded. "I th-think if anyone b-but my mother had t-tried to save him, he would have d-died. On t-top

of the p-poison, he was severely injured. It t-took several weeks t-to nurse him b-back to health. I was already s-studying with

my mother at th-that t-time, so I helped a lot..."

Naptunie blushed. Just from her expression, they could tell she was visualizing the scene like in one of her romance

books. Tessa knew the reality probably hadn't been so pretty. The Goddess of Water had spent a lot of time in the north with

her husband, working on improving medicine for injured or sick soldiers while her husband and sons fought the barbarians from the north or trained. Tessandra had also been trained in the camp, a few years later, so her imagination probably took her closer to the truth.

"Th-that's how I met Ashen. We d-didn't know who he was until he t-told us... When he got b-better, Father b-began ppersonally t-training him too. Ashen wanted t-to get stronger, t-to one d-day b-be able to fight off his f-father and reconquer his K-Kingdom. He d-didn't t-talk much about it, th-though. I only heard him t-talking with my older b-brother once..."

"Well, gratitude hasn't been choking him," scoffed Tessandra. "For someone who was trained by the War God himself, he should have been a bit happier to see you, no? He didn't even invite you himself, it turned out to be a scheme of Yassim's..."

"I t-told you, my father ch-chased him—"

"I would have kicked his butt out of the Empire too if I had found a guy flirting with a girl four years younger, Cessi. I

don't blame your dad on this one, and you and I both know how he and your brothers are protective of you. Seeing what happened next, it looks like they didn't make such a bad choice, either..."

"Maybe it's because I am one of his citizens," said Nana, "but I really do feel a bit sorry for His Majesty now that I

have heard all of this... He really seemed in love with Lady Cessi, and to have to brutally leave like that... I am glad he came

back and got rid of the tyrant, but still... I am glad you can be together again now!"

"Easy there," exclaimed Tessandra. "For now, they are not together!"

"I d-do want to win the c-competition fairly," said Cessilia.

"Yeah, I have a feeling your rivals don't know what fair means. Did you girls already forget? There was a murder. And that was only the first banquet too. Who knows what those crazy wenches will do next... We can't lower our guard now. We

have to stay together and be cautious in case something else happens. Even if that stupid Sabael has decided to leave us..."

She walked ahead and kept grumbling, leaving Cessilia and Nana behind to feel a bit sorry for her. It was clear she was

still thinking about their earlier argument and needed some time to work through this.

Meanwhile, Naptunie walked a bit closer to Cessilia.

"Lady Cessi... I get how our King got his white hair and skills now, but I was wondering, you know, about that dragon armor of his..."

"Th-that... I am not s-sure," confessed Cessilia. "I had n-never seen it b-before. Men in my family d-don't need to wear something like th-that, so..."

Naptunie's question had Cessilia intrigued as well. Where did Ashen get his dragon-scale armor from? She was sure she had never seen such a thing before; all the armor her family wore was made of metal or leather, and they really didn't need it, thanks to the dragon skin that naturally appeared to protect them. Unless in times of war, it wouldn't have made much sense for them to need extra protection... However, where would Ashen have gotten such a thing, if it wasn't from her family?

"Here we are!" exclaimed Nana suddenly.

The neighborhood they had arrived at was quieter than Cessilia expected, with fewer people too. All the shops were rather small and all lined up, literally next door to one another. They were all so similar, with the same architecture, one window and one door on the street, their products lined up in front with little stalls and signs, so they had to watch out for the right door or they might enter the next one without realizing. They were all made of stone bricks, covered with something that looked like a foreign variety of ivy, and only the roofs were of different colors from one shop to another. Cessilia noticed

several shops had similar little insignias in front, symbols that felt somewhat familiar.

"Those are the clans' insignias," explained Nana. "You may have seen them engraved in the seats of the Lords at the

Royal Councils, or on the candidates' jewelry and clothes. Because the rivalry between most families is rather strong, we tend

to show which building or business belongs to which clan to avoid issues. This way, no one can pretend they began a fight not knowing whom the shop belonged to..."

"What of those who don't have one?" frowned Tessandra.

"Oh, well, they are the independent owners... Those who don't belong to a clan, or came from the outside. The people

of each tribe do tend to buy from their own, so it might be a bit harder for those who don't have the support of a clan. ...It's not

completely bad, though! Some people are prejudiced against some clans, so they'd prefer to buy from an independent person

rather than a tribe's bigger shop. It requires a lot of money to have an established business in the Capital too, so those people

are usually already wealthy enough to maintain their business, or are experts at what they sell. Plus, they get allowances from

the Kingdom sometimes, and they also have less taxes from the Commerce Chamber. As long as they don't get on the wrong

side of a strong clan like the Pangoja, they are usually fine!"

"That's our Nana," said Tessandra, giving her a little elbow bump. "Knowledgeable as always!"

Nana blushed but smiled proudly, and guided them to one of the shops with an insignia. This shop was obviously an

apothecary, even without reading the sign. Their stall outside was flooded with plants, dried or in pots, and tons of little glass containers and parchments. Even before going in, Cessilia recognized the familiar scent of medicine and herbs she would always smell in her mother's office at the Onyx Castle.

"...So, this sign is...?" asked Tessandra, pointing at it right before they walked in.

"It's the Hashat Family," said a female voice as they walked in.

Surprised, Cessilia recognized Lady Ishira, the candidate of the Hashat Family. She was looking very different from

when they had met during the first banquet. She was wearing a layered, dark green dress with leaf patterns, and her black hair

was only held back by a simple matching headband. She was rather skinny but almost as tall as Cessilia, and her voluminous

mane seemed to be three times the size of her face. She also had several tattoos which her dress covered during the event, and

wore two prettily crafted wooden earrings.

"Good morning, Princess," she said calmly. "The eight-shaped snake with the orchid branch is the symbol of my family, the Hashat Family."

"Lady Ishira," said Naptunie, a bit surprised.

Ishira greeted her too, and Tessandra when she walked in last. She was helping out rather than shopping as a customer,

carrying a little basket with an ensemble of dried herbs Cessilia's eyes fell on.

"...You are m-making m-medicine for head-headaches?" she guessed.

Ishira smiled.

"You're really skilled in medicine," she said. "That's right. My father has been rather unwell lately, I was hoping to prepare something to heal him... To what do we owe the pleasure of the Princess' visit in our humble shop?"

"I wanted t-to see what k-kind of herbs are f-found around here," explained Cessilia. "I'm c-curious if th-there are some I have never seen b-before..."

"Oh, surely," Ishira smiled. "If the Princess is alright with it, I will happily show you myself."

She turned to the man behind the counter, most likely the shop owner and a relative of hers, and nodded to him,

exchanging a simple signal. The man nodded back and stepped behind a little curtain at the back, going to get something. Ishira

turned back to the Princess, smiling to her politely.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to talk much during the banquet," she said. "I am more than honored to finally be able to meet

the Princess privately, though. I believe we have a lot in common."

"I b-believe so t-too."

Unlike Bastat, Cessilia could feel that Ishira was a bit more reserved, and probably waiting to fully make up her mind

about her, despite her words. The young woman was still extremely polite, though, and didn't show any animosity. When the shop owner came back with a book, she took it and presented it to Cessilia herself. "Princess, this is a copy of the Hashat Family's almanac of herbs, plants, and medicines known in the Eastern Kingdom until today."

"Th-this... Isn't this something t-too p-precious t-to share with a foreigner?" Cessilia muttered.

The book looked heavy, and very well taken care of. The binding looked perfect, and the cover didn't have any dust on

it, despite the pages looking a bit worn. Ishira slowly shook her head.

"It is precious, indeed, but it is our core belief that knowledge is meant to be shared.

The Hashat Family is dedicated to

the study and research of plants and medicine, and even on this side of the continent we have heard about the Princess'

mother's achievements in terms of medical knowledge and development. Please take this as a token of goodwill from the

Hashat Family, and our hope that we will be able to exchange much more in the future."

Cessilia smiled and took the heavy book, her heart excited to discover its secrets and learn something new.

"Is th-there anything th-the Hashat Family wants f-from me in exchange for th-this?" she asked bluntly.

Ishira smiled.

"Indeed, Princess. Our Family Leader is looking forward to meeting you."

Chapter 13

"I really don't like that they didn't include Nana," grumbled Tessandra.

The girls were walking back to the castle, a couple of hours later. Cessilia was still holding the heavy almanac of the

Hashat Family, but she had already discussed plenty about plants and medicine with Ishira. As it turned out, the young women

had a common passion for the study of plants and medicine, but also the same age and a real affinity. The only issue was that

Ishira was clearly tied to her family and tribe, which had yet to make up their mind about Cessilia. She had kept her distance

throughout and spoke politely to the Princess rather than trying to get familiar. Hence, the invitation to a dinner that same

evening was formally addressed to Cessilia, and only allowed her to come with

Tessandra. Although she had tried to be subtle,

it was clear Ishira didn't include Naptunie in this.

"It's alright," said Nana. "It can't be helped, this is serious business between the clans. I also think it is better I don't

come, I don't like being involved in these kinds of things too much, really."

"The Hashat Family doesn't seem as bad as the others, at least," sighed Tessandra,

"and this way, perhaps we will get to know more about our mothers..."

"Your mothers?" Nana repeated, curious. "What do you mean?"

"My m-mother and T-Tessandra's were b-born into a t-tribe that d-disappeared long ago," explained Cessilia. "It was c-called the Rain T-Tribe, and they mostly had white-skinned p-people. B-but their village was raided, p-people were k-killed or sold long b-before we were b-born, so only a few ind-dividuals remain..."

"The Eastern Kingdom was the main enemy," sighed Tessandra, "but the truth is, the survivors were sold in both the Dragon Empire and the Eastern Kingdom... which is why Cessi and I were curious about people with lighter skin tones, like in that Hashat Family. We are probably related somehow..."

"Oh... I'm sorry, I didn't know," muttered Nana, lowering her head. They were just entering the castle, but Cessilia shook her head.

"You c-couldn't have known, Nana. It-t all happened long ago."

"And as it turns out, no one likes to talk about slaves," scoffed Tessandra. After that, Naptunie didn't dare bring up the subject anymore, and all three girls went into the castle. To Cessilia's surprise, guards had been posted in front of her room, although they didn't move a muscle upon seeing the trio. Tessandra frowned, but the girls walked into the bedroom in silence, only to find the triplets there. The three of them got down on their knees as soon as they saw Cessilia.

"Greetings, Princess," said the oldest. "Our apologies for failing to protect the lady's belongings. This won't happen anymore."

"I d-don't t-trust you," Cessilia retorted coldly.

"We will do our very best to earn the Princess' trust again," insisted the servants, lowering their heads even more.

Cessilia glared their way once more and then turned around to ignore the three of them. Looking around her room, she noticed the new pile of clothing they were busy putting into the wardrobe just a second ago, and the several boxes scattered on the floor too.

"What's this?" asked Tessa.

"His Majesty offers these gifts to the Princess. Since the Princess' belongings were... damaged, the King said it was his responsibility to replace them."

"This wasn't the King's doing," retorted Tessa. "The Yekara Clan almost openly admitted to it!"

"...His Majesty said he will make sure compensation will be received from the culprits in due time."

"What a-about Lady V-Vena's murder?" Cessilia asked.

"His Majesty has his suspicions, but we have yet to find the murderer. The investigation is still ongoing, and more people are still being interrogated. He asks for the Princess to be very careful until the real culprits are caught."

"That's easy for him to say," scoffed Tessandra. "There hasn't been a day without a burglary, a murder, or an ambush since we came here. Just wait until I get my hands on that damn vermin... I need something to release my nerves on."

"...You th-three can leave," said Cessilia. "I need t-to change."

"We can assist—"

"G-get out."

The triplets bowed, and quickly left, most likely to guard the room. Tessa pinched her lips. She wasn't fond of the triplets, either, but she was a bit surprised by Cessilia's cold attitude toward them. She crossed her arms and approached her cousin, who was still rummaging through the dresses.

"What is it, Cessi? We already established those three were spying on us for the King... is there something else?"

"They are t-trained for fighting," said Cessilia, "b-but they aren't g-good servants at all. They d-didn't guard our room and b-burglars came in. They d-didn't offer us anything to d-drink although we just c-came back and it's hot outside, and the pplants haven't b-been watered either."

Tessandra frowned and turned to the plants. Only her cousin would have noticed the leaves of the only two small plants by the balcony, slightly less green than when they had arrived. She looked around and realized Cessilia was telling the truth. It was all small details, but for someone who had lived in a palace, it was obvious. The bedsheets had small wrinkles, and there was a thin layer of dust on the columns of the room.

"Fine, perhaps they are bodyguards that have been trained to be servants, but—"

"I d-don't think they are b-bodyguards, either. Somebody was f-following me yesterday when I was at the m-market with Lady B-Bastat."

"Now that you mention it... I had a feeling we were being followed when we were with Sabael, but the place was so crowded, I couldn't find who it was."

"Ashen also knew K-Krai had taken us out," Cessilia nodded. "D-do you remember how long it t-took us to get from the c-castle to the Outer G-Gates?"

"He arrived to save you almost right after those guys had begun chasing us... Even with a very fast horse, it should have taken longer than that. ...Do you think the triplets were watching us and tipped him off? That we had left?"

"I'm n-not sure," sighed Cessilia, "...b-but I don't t-trust them."

"Well, I don't either, but it's rare to see you so... careful, Cessi," said Tessandra, sitting down on the bed.

"It's l-like you said. There was a m-murder already... We need to b-be more c-careful." Tessa and Nana exchanged a look. Naptunie nodded, agreeing with Cessilia. The fact that a girl from one of the most

powerful clans had been murdered inside the castle itself was troubling enough already, but after the burglary and the attack, they just couldn't act as if this was simply an isolated threat anymore. They were all impacted by the clans trying to push their candidates up while getting rid of others.

While rummaging through the dresses, Cessi couldn't help but think she had made a wise decision, keeping her relationship with the King a secret for now...

"Nana, when will th-the next b-banquet be?"

"Oh my god, I completely forgot to tell you!" exclaimed the young woman, jumping on her feet. "I heard from my uncle

that it was decided at the morning council that the next banquet will be tomorrow!

Apparently, since the candidates are in

danger, they all want to rush the competition. A lot of the Lords also asked to have bodyguards in the castle to protect their

candidates, but His Majesty didn't attend that council, and they just kept fighting about it, so it was dismissed for now..."

"No wonder," scoffed Tessandra. "The King won't accept them bringing more of their own men into the castle when

they are all already busy trying to murder each other... I wonder who made him late, hm, Cessi?"

Her cousin blushed, tightening her grip on the dress she was holding. Next to them, Naptunie blushed too, and went to

help Cessilia sort the dresses, clearly needing to do something with her hands.

"The Lords agreed to have the next banquet held in the arena, apparently."

"An arena?" Tessandra repeated. "...Is that a joke?"

"No... Apparently, several of the candidates have asked to have more space for their next demonstrations, so enough of them agreed to have it held in the arena..."

"N-Nana, where is th-the arena?"

"Oh, it's below the ground, under the castle! It was built to look like an arena, with stairs and everything, but it's not

that big... It was originally a vacant cave in the castle's foundations, but the previous King had decided to use it for the soldiers

to train because he had too many of them. Sadly, it became more of an execution room than anything. I have never seen it myself, I heard it was closed for years."

Tessandra smirked.

"Of course... They don't need more space, they need an underground location."

"Somewhere a d-dragon can't reach," muttered Cessilia.

Nana's jaw dropped.

"I didn't even think of that! Do you think they chose that location because Sir Dragon scared them?!"

"Or because he won't be able to defend Cessi this way..."

"What d-do you think, Nana, c-can a dragon g-get there?"

Nana pouted, a bit unsure.

"I've never gone to that place myself... It's probably closed to the public too if they are to be ready tomorrow. I could ask the people working here for information, though! I get along with some of the girls in the kitchen, and—"

"Let me guess, one of them is your cousin?" chuckled Tessandra.

"H-h-how did you know...?"

"I think I'm starting to understand a thing or two about your family, Nana. Alright, we can try and ask about it, then. I like to know the grounds before a battle... and see if it's really as protected as they said."

"We won't need t-to use K-Krai..." Cessilia protested.

"The last time we couldn't call out the big guy, we ended up running with three dozen assassins behind us, Cessilia. I

will go check with Nana, just to see what it's like, alright?"

Cessilia protested, but the two women quickly headed out, leaving her there with her dresses. Cessilia let out a long sigh. She didn't have any idea yet of what she would do at the next banquet, especially in a new location. She would have to

figure something out by tomorrow, which worried her a little. After she had tried to act tough in front of Ashen, she didn't want

to act disappointing in front of all the Lords, candidates, and him... She had ruled out showing more of her dragon-related

abilities. It was enough that she had made a statement about it. If she relied any more on this, it would be the same as crushing

her way to the top, the last thing she wanted. For now, Cessilia was interested in winning, in a fair way.

She already had the Sehsan, Dorosef, and Hashat as her allies, or at least, not her enemies. The Pangoja and Yekara

Clans were the main source of trouble, but from what she had seen, this wasn't just about her; those two clans would have also

gladly gotten rid of the King and their other rivals if they could... From their candidates' arrogance, Cessilia could predict

those two clans wouldn't ally themselves with another. Only the Nahaf and Yonchaa she had yet to meet, but they were at the

bottom of her priorities for now. She was more interested in the mysterious Cheshi Clan... If they were opposing the King for

the murder of the Kunu Tribe they weren't even allied with, why were they still alive? It was like those people were in a cold

war with the White King, biding their time. Perhaps they were even watching this competition from afar?

At least, Cessilia could feel a bit better, now that she was more confident Ashen's heart was hers. The dresses in front

of her were all absolutely gorgeous... Some even had threads of gold, complex embroideries, and gorgeous silk materials she

hadn't seen in the market. Naptunie seemed a bit dazzled when she had seen them too; Cessilia would ask her later if she knew

about these materials. In the meantime, she felt a bit happy and took her time picking the ones she liked the most, until a little knock was heard on the door.

Cessilia frowned, wondering who would knock without announcing themselves, aside from Tessandra who would have barged in...

"...Who is it?"

The door slowly opened, and Jisel entered, a smile on her lips. Cessilia's heart dropped. Something about that woman

made her uneasy. The way her smile didn't go all the way up to her eyes, or how she wriggled her body around like a snake

with a steel spine. Cessilia began glaring at her without even thinking, while Jisel casually made her way into the room.

"Looks like I'm bothering the Princess, again," said Jisel with her honeyed voice. "...Did you enjoy your presents?"

Cessilia's eyes quickly went to the pile of dresses she was admiring just before. How did Jisel know about the presents

sent by Ashen already? If he had just sent them that morning... That woman kept walking around the room as if she was visiting

it for the first time. She casually put her fingers on the nacre of the column, reminding Cessilia how she had done the very same

thing just a few days prior...

"You really don't like me, do you, Princess?"

Cessilia didn't answer. The answer was obvious... She was trying to understand why that woman had come. She didn't

believe it was a coincidence for her to appear while Tessandra was away...

"That's fine," said Jisel. "You and I are more alike than we would probably like to admit..."

Dragon daughters are so

easily made jealous, and rather possessive. Aren't we?"

Cessilia's heart froze.

"You're no d-dragon daughter," she hissed back.

"How would you know?" scoffed Jisel. "We grew up in different countries, yet don't we look alike?"

Jisel turned around. Cessilia realized they were about the same height, and had a similar physique, although Jisel's

dress was so flowy, she hid her curves. Her hair was slightly curly too, like Cessilia's, and her red hair was a shade not too far

away from hers. But the most similar thing between them was their skin tone. Even Cessilia's siblings all had different skin

tones, varying in shades closer to either her mother's or her father's. But for Cessilia, who'd never seen anyone out of her

family look like them, seeing someone else with a skin color so close to hers was disturbing. Jisel tilted her head.

"You're having dinner with the Hashat Family leader tonight, aren't you?"

"How d-did you know?"

Jisel chuckled.

"The walls have ears here, Princess. There's little you can conceal from others, no matter how hard you try. Everyone talks... Everyone listens too. I am good at getting useful information and using it well. ...You might want to remember that."

"Are you th-threatening me?"

"No, I'm letting you know I can help. Again."

"B-but we hate each other."

Jisel chuckled and began slowly stepping toward her.

"Hate and anger are emotions that only serve men, Princess. I can't be bothered to hate you. It wouldn't help me, would

it? I can't hate my owner's lover. Who would you think he'd kick out first? His loyal dog or his beloved Princess?"

Cessilia was shocked. Jisel was comparing herself to... a dog? Since the beginning, she had felt something was off

about that woman. While her speech felt real, it also sounded like... someone broken inside. Jisel didn't have the eyes of a

playful, young woman, she had the darkness of someone who had seen a lot already.

She reminded Cessilia of her aunt, or her

grandmother, who could smile while coldly killing someone...

"D-don't come near me," Cessilia suddenly blurted out, seeing Jisel so close.

"You're not scared of me," said Jisel, ignoring her words. "You're scared because we're too similar, aren't we? If we

had been born in each other's family...? Who do you think would be backing off now?"

Cessilia only now realized she had taken a step back. She glared at Jisel, but the woman chuckled, and turned around,

putting her hands together behind her back while walking away.

"Ha... If I were you, I'd pick the green dress to visit the Hashat people. Just a tip... from a non-friend."

"Why are you d-doing this? P-provoking me? What d-do you have to gain?!"

"Because it's a bit fun... and also, because we need each other."

"I d-don't need you."

"Oh, but you do. Aren't you curious to know who commanded Vena's death, and the attack at the Outer Wall?"

Cessilia's expression fell.

"How d-did you..."

"I'm telling you, Princess. I've lived in this Kingdom for a long time. I know how to get information. Finding who

bribed the guards is almost too easy for me... as well as getting rid of them."

Jisel chuckled, and leaning her back against the door, she smiled at Cessilia once again.

"How about you try, Princess? Ask the Hashat Leader about me tonight. Ask those people my story... and your mother's

family, of course. Isn't that what you want to find out? You'll see and hear interesting things, Princess... and you can make up

your own mind later. And if you still think we shouldn't be allies after tonight... well, every woman for herself then."

She silently left without adding a word, leaving Cessilia to stand there, frustrated and furious.

What was that woman's real aim? From the beginning, Cessilia didn't believe her words.

As Tessandra had said, she

was a snake in a nest of rats. Why would she help her rival? She had called Ashen her owner... Did she really have no

connection to the Hashat Family, or any other, then? If so, why would the leader know her story...? Cessilia was feeling so

uneasy about everything, she barely heard Tessandra and Nana coming back.

"Cessi, we tried but the place is closed off to anyone but the Royal Servants, since they are preparing the banquet, but...

Hey, what is it?"

"Lady Cessilia, you're pale," noted Naptunie, walking up to her, carrying a large volume in her arms.

"N-no, I'm... It's n-nothing," muttered Cessilia.

Her cousin didn't seem to believe her, frowning, but Cessilia averted her gaze by walking away from them. A bit

mindlessly, she picked up the dresses and shoved them in the wardrobe, only keeping a dark blue one out. Her pride kept her

from following that woman's advice, although she doubted Jisel would have lied about such a trivial thing. Cessilia was only

picking this blue dress out of anger at her rival. Plus, it wasn't like this dress wasn't fitting, just that it wasn't green. The

Princess found it prettier and tried to convince herself this was a good enough reason to pick it.

She didn't feel like sharing about Jisel's visit just yet, so she stayed silent despite her attitude probably betraying her.

No doubt Tessandra could tell something was wrong, but the Princess hoped her cousin would wait a bit before interrogating her further.

"Oh... Uh, my cousin couldn't help, but there is this book about the castle and the geographical information of the

territory," said Naptunie, a bit unsure about the atmosphere. "It's a bit of an older edition, but it should still be pretty accurate!

I had read it once when I was younger, but I couldn't understand everything back then... A lot of it is archeology and geology."

"Th-thank you, Nana." Cessilia smiled, happy to have her mind distracted. "That might b-be exactly what I n-need."

"...Do you already have an idea what you're going to do, Lady Cessilia?" Naptunie raised her eyebrows, curious.

"N-not yet," she admitted.

She laid the dress out in front of her, checking that the size would be right and if she needed any alterations, and then

went to the small bathroom to change, although she could still hear the other two.

Cessilia found the dress looked even prettier

once she had it on, the overall look pleasing her. It was a deep blue with a braided leather belt, off-the-shoulder but with long sleeves, and it emphasized the curves of her body well, with a long, straight skirt. The fact that Ashen had been the one to gift her this dress calmed her heart a little. It really was pretty, yet not too showy; just her type. She walked back into the room, looking through the little nacre jewelry she had bought with Nana for something to match her dress.

“Surviving would be a good start,” sighed Tessa, lying on the couch. “This new banquet smells like a trap from a mile away! An underground place, of all things...”

Cessilia wouldn't argue that the location had clearly been chosen to avoid another appearance from Krai. However, she didn't want to use her father's dragon a second time. She would have to do things in a more subtle way from now on.

Approaching it head-on wasn't her thing in the first place, but at the first banquet, she needed to make a clear statement so people would leave them alone, and not risk putting Nana in danger again. Luckily, Vena's murder had calmed everyone down... although the Yekara Clan was still the most problematic. They clearly didn't fear much about getting caught for murdering someone in the King's residence. Not only that, but corruption was blatantly rampant among the officials, and this wasn't something she could get rid of with fear alone.

While she got ready, Naptunie opened her large book and read the part that referred to the cave, happy to dive into some research for Cessilia. The young woman's eyes finished reading the four pages in less than a couple of minutes to sum it up.

“This cave is called the Thousand Years Cave, and is believed to be at least as old as the Capital's island itself,” she said. “Made of limestone, it was left behind when the sea levels went lower under the castle over the years. It's basically a sea cave, and there is still some salty water left behind, a small, shallow lake in the center of the cave. There is apparently even an opening to the sea remaining, but it's hidden in the deepest part of the lake, the only part of it that is actually deep. The tunnel connecting to the sea should be there, but it is completely submerged, so although there are still some small fish, not even a really good human swimmer can get out this way. According to this book, about a third of the bottom of the cave is an underground lake, so I think the arena will most likely be built around it.”

“Trying to trap us with an underground setting and water?” Tessandra snickered.

“Now there is an entrance from within the castle,” explained Nana. “The main entrance, at least, but there might be a

couple of side ones or even secret doors to other parts of the castle. Previous kings apparently had planned to try and use the cave as a refuge for people if needed, but they never found a way to actually create another opening to the outside, as the rock wall is too thick to build anything and the underwater passage is unusable. So it was used for the storage of goods, but then the wars happened and people ransacked it, so it was closed and vacant for a while. Then, as I said, the previous King turned it into a training and execution ground..."

"Are th-there many c-caves around?" asked Cessilia.

"I think they are quite common," nodded Nana. "From what I have seen in geography and history books, the sea used to be much higher a few centuries back, so I guess there could be more secret underwater caves we don't know of! I only know a couple that are somewhat famous in the islands, and reachable by boat. There might be more farther away, though, the most recent maps are showing more and more islands as we discover them. According to legends, pirates used natural caves as their lair, because their location was easy to hide and hard to approach... Pirate stories are quite popular too!"

Naptunie suddenly realized she may have talked a bit too much, and closed her mouth with a little nervous chuckle, although neither of the cousins minded.

"That's our favorite bookworm for you. ...What do you think, Cessi?" asked Tessandra. The Princess, who was currently arranging her hair into a high ponytail and combing her long curls, tilted her head.

"It sounds like we might b-be lucky," she said. "Our d-dragon might not be fond of caves, but we are g-good swimmers.

We c-can always f-find a way."

"No, no, no!" exclaimed Nana. "You don't understand, this isn't just a long swim, it's an impossible, very long swim, and underwater! According to the data here, they estimated it would take at least ten or fifteen minutes for someone to swim out to the other side! And it's just an estimation, no human has ever done it! No one can hold their breath for that long... Plus, it will mostly be in the dark, so the risk of hitting a rock or something is high! This is really too scary!"

The two cousins exchanged a glance.

"...Which side of the ocean does that lead to? Just in case," asked Tessandra, sitting up.

"Uh... let's see... To the east. There's a little beach with a small cave on the other side of the castle's rock that is believed to be the other side of that underwater tunnel, on the sea level..."

"Can that beach be accessed any other way?"

"Only with a boat, I think, but not many people should even know of it. It's too far below the castle's level to jump from

above, and it's too far from the other sides of the castle's island to swim to it either. It's visible if you stand at the edge of the Fish Market though. But it's not recorded on any map or book that I know of. I heard my cousins used to go to that beach to play, but there isn't much to do there, and it's hard to maneuver a boat..."

"How about a dragon landing there?"

"Uh... If it's Sir Dragon, I think he could..."

Naptunie looked completely lost between the two women's cunning expressions, Tessandra even looking a bit excited.

The only thing she understood was that they were evidently planning to use the waterway and beach as an escape route, but she had no idea how in the world they would accomplish such a miracle. Eventually, she sighed and closed the book, not willing to ask more. At times, she had a hard time understanding how the two ladies thought, but she did trust them. She was starting to understand how ordinary she was compared to these two and their family's strange abilities...

"We should p-probably get g-going now," said Cessilia, standing up, all ready.

"Lady Cessilia, you're stunning! This dress really suits you... Are you not going to change, Lady Tessa?" asked Naptunie.

Tessandra grimaced. She had clearly made no effort to change her clothes and didn't want to move from the couch either. Still, she slowly sat up.

"I told you it's fine to just call me Tessa. ...And I'm only going as a bodyguard. I'm no princess like Cessi. It's also pretty clear they are only interested in her. I only regret that you can't come too, Nana."

"It's alright! I will stay with my uncle and read this book! Now that I've read a few lines, I feel like re-reading it..."

Maybe I will find something useful for the banquet! Something that doesn't include a dark and scary underwater tunnel... I

should probably prepare some sort of performance too, although I'm not interested."

"You'll d-do great." Cessilia smiled. "J-just make sure you d-don't stay around my b-bedroom. There might b-be another attack..."

Naptunie looked around the room, as if she suddenly became cautious of it.

"...I understand. I'll be careful then!"

"I want to grab some dinner before we go, will you come with me, Nana?"

"Aren't we invited t-to dinner already?" said Cessilia, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, and we don't know how long it will take, if it will be bad, or worse...poisoned. I would rather have a snack

before to be sure not to starve later. Let's just make a detour on the way out."

Cessilia chuckled, but she suspected Tessandra's sudden need for a snack had to do with the fact that the kitchens were

about halfway to Counselor Yamino's office. She probably wanted to accompany Naptunie and make sure nothing happened to

her before she got safely to her uncle. The young Dorosef girl had no idea, either, and was only excited to grab a little treat with Tessandra.

The three girls left the room, and this time, Cessilia took a good look around before closing the door behind her. She was suspicious of how easy it had been for intruders to get in, and even Jisel had come in without the guards notifying her.

Either the King's mistress had caused a distraction to be able to sneak past them, or those people were more easily bribed than

Ashen thought. Maybe because of that, she felt particularly on edge and cautious of her surroundings while the three girls

moved around the castle. She looked out for any shadow at a corner, glanced at the guards to try and feel if there was any ill

intent toward their trio, and kept close to Tessa and Nana.

Because of that, she didn't miss the steps following them shortly after. However, she couldn't feel any maliciousness,

and whoever was following them was careful not to approach either.

"T-Tessa, t-take Nana to Uncle Yamino's office, p-please."

"...What about you?" asked her cousin, frowning.

"I th-think I forgot something," she lied. "D-don't worry, I'll meet you at th-the entrance!"

"...Alright."

Tessandra nodded, and while she and Nana walked away, Cessilia took a different corridor. She now knew the castle

well enough to find her way to the entrance, and as soon as she found an isolated enough area with a wide window, she turned

around, glaring at the shadow.

She was about to ask whoever followed her to reveal their presence, but they stepped forward before she opened her

mouth. Cessi calmed down as she recognized the large figure that came up to her.

"Ash-!"

His lips were on hers before she could even finish, claiming a passionate kiss. Cessilia blushed helplessly, surprised

by his fervor. His overwhelming stature was pushing her against the wall, wrapping his arms around her body and slightly

lifting her off her feet. Cessilia grabbed his large shoulders by reflex, answering his kiss with a smile, relieved and happy to

see him again.

When he stopped, a bit out of breath, she chuckled and caressed his cheek.

"D-did you miss me?" she whispered.

Their faces were so close, she could see every detail of his skin, of his irises, and the small scars on his messily

shaved cheeks and chin.

"...Like crazy," he admitted in a breath. "I was dying to see you again after this morning... I couldn't focus on anything

else."

Cessilia chuckled, and they exchanged a gentler, slower kiss. They were almost hidden in a narrow and deserted corridor with Ashen's cloak covering them. His dark eyes looked almost in a daze, staring at her as if he was worried he'd forget her face if he looked away for even a second. His large hand was holding on to her waist, his thumb slowly rubbing, spreading his warmth everywhere he touched, and more importantly, keeping their bodies close.

"...You look beautiful," he said, glancing from her high ponytail to her dress. He kissed her shoulder, before noticing the simple necklace of nacre around her neck. "Didn't you like what I sent?"

"I like th-this too." Cessilia smiled. "I b-bought it with Nana at the m-market... P-plus, your mistress c-came to visit bbefore I could ch-check it..."

"Jisel?" His eyes darkened. "What the fuck did she want with you?"

"How c-could she c-come into my room?" Cessilia ignored his question. Ashen stepped back, looking angry.

"I gave orders for her to not approach you," he said.

"She d-did. I d-don't know who you ordered, Ashen, b-but it's not working."

The King's expression got even darker, and Cessilia felt the same. This meant he had even less authority than he thought, or the castle was full of corrupt guards.

"...I'll talk to her," he hissed.

Cessilia felt a bit upset that he wouldn't already have. Had he avoided his mistress purposely, or simply forgotten to

tell her to stay away? Either way, she wasn't very satisfied with this. She looked away, a bit sullen, but Ashen gently caressed her cheek.

"...I'm sorry, Cessilia. I swear it won't happen again."

"Next t-time, I won't be as p-polite," she muttered.

He chuckled.

"You don't have to be."

He sighed, and hoping to lighten her mood a bit, leaned forward to kiss her temple this time. His stubble tickled her a

bit causing Cessilia to smile. Turning back toward him, she found Ashen was frowning again.

"...W-what is it?"

"Nothing."

"D-don't tell me it's nothing."

"Sorry. It's... things are a bit tense. And with that thing with the guards... I'm worried someone is going to attack you again."

"I c-can take c-care of myself, Ashen."

He smirked, not as a means to mock her, but because he knew that to be the truth. His hands went down around her, caressing her waist and back, sending excited shivers down her spine.

“...How are your injuries?” he asked.

“They’re all healed now.”

Ashen smiled, and leaned forward, his lips dangerously close. She could feel his breathing, gentle against her skin, and the thumping of his heart.

“...Dine with me tonight. We can have a date... and then...”

“We c-can’t,” Cessilia suddenly put her hands on his torso, pushing him away.

“What?” he exclaimed, upset. “Why not? ...Are you still upset with me?”

Cessilia had to bite her lip not to smile. He looked like a big dog, sorry it had offended its owner. She could almost see

the white ears popping out of his hair... She shook her head slowly and caressed his hair like she would have petted an obedient dog.

“No,” she chuckled, “b-but I am invited t-to a dinner with the Hashat Family Leader.”

“...The Hashat Family?” Ashen frowned. “Tonight? ...I don’t like this.”

“It sounds like you d-don’t like me t-to be with anyone else, Ashen...”

“That’s true,” he scoffed. “Plus, their heir is known to be handsome, or so they say...”

“Who says th-that?”

Ashen’s expression fell, and he turned to Cessilia.

“I haven’t heard it from women!” he exclaimed. “Well, maybe... I mean, I’ve seen him, I guess he’s... fine.”

Cessilia chuckled and kissed his cheek.

“I like you jealous. It’s your t-turn.”

“Cessi...”

“I’m about t-to go, anyway. T-Tessa is coming t-too.”

He sighed, pouting a bit, but didn’t insist anymore. Ashen’s eyes went to the end of the corridor, verifying that no one

was spying on them. After a while, he turned back to her, resolute.

“...I’ll come and get you,” he whispered.

“But...”

“I’ll wait until you’re done there, and then we can have our date... I really want to show you my city. That was one

regret I had when we met in the Empire... I never got to show you anything about where I came from. Let me show you tonight.”

He grabbed her hands in his, holding them gently. Cessilia nodded, and got on her toes to give him another quick kiss.

“...Alright,” she muttered, “I’ll see you later t-tonight, then.”

To her surprise, Ashen answered with another sudden, more passionate kiss. Unlike her chaste kiss, his was passionate,

with his tongue and all his desire in it, making her legs a bit weak and sending blood rushing to her cheeks. When they

separated, Cessilia was out of breath and red.

“See you later, my love.”

Chapter 14

“...Your cheeks are still red.”

“I’m t-telling you, they’re n-not.”

Cessilia couldn't take much more of her cousin's suspicious eyes. She was aware of her uncontrollable blushing, and her heart that was still beating a bit too fast. When she had gotten down to the castle gates, after stealing a few more passionate kisses in the dark with the King, Cessilia was well-aware she wouldn't be able to avoid Tessandra's sharp senses. Still, she kept nervously combing through her curls and walking a bit faster to get ahead of her inquisitive cousin.

"H-how is Nana?"

"She's fine." Tessandra shrugged. "She was already on the second chapter when I left, and Yamino and her will just

have dinner, I guess. I really like that little chick."

"Me t-too." Cessilia smiled. "She's b-braver than she looks t-too."

She still had in mind how Nana had bravely come back to try and help her, despite how dangerous and helpless the

situation was at the time. That had definitely sealed their friendship. The young Dorosef girl was honest, shy but brilliant, and

very trusting too. Cessilia really liked those qualities in Naptunie.

"How about th-things with Sabael?" Cessilia asked, hoping to divert the conversation.

Tessandra grimaced.

"You've seen it for yourself. Nothing new... At least, he hasn't shown his pretty face since. I've decided I don't really

care, though. I'm fine."

She didn't sound like she was, but Cessilia decided not to push the matter any further.

She knew Tessa enough to know

her cousin was the type to toughen up when things got hard for her. Even if she was upset, she didn't want pity or any consoling

words from anyone. She was better off acting like a strong, independent woman and convincing herself she was over this.

Hence, neither of them mentioned the handsome guard again, and they kept walking in silence for a while.

The streets of Aestara were getting quiet despite the sun still in the sky, slowly going down in bright orange hues. It

would sometimes blind them in between two buildings, before they got to another street below, slowly heading downtown.

Without exchanging a word about it, both women were a bit on edge, and watching their surroundings for any enemies, or a

possible ambush. They'd had their share of traps already, so now, it was a given that they didn't trust any shadow in the streets.

Nothing major seemed to be happening, though. This was an evening like any other in the Capital, with shop owners slowly

closing their businesses, locals going home after a long day, and Royal Guards patrolling. Little candles in seashells were lit at

the window sills to add some light inside, and because the weather was good, just a warm, little breeze, many still had their

windows open. A few children ran ahead of them, playing with a small dog.

“...It r-reminds me of our ch-childhood,” smiled Cessilia.

“The rowdy part,” chuckled Tessandra. “Whenever you guys came to the Capital, we would all run in the streets and cause a commotion...”

Cessilia smiled. Having a large family had always been a blessing. She had older brothers to rely on, and her younger siblings to take care of. Because she and Tessandra were born the same year, just a few months apart; she felt like they were as close as sisters, with different personalities that suited each other.

While reminiscing about their childhood, they slowly made their way toward the quieter streets of the northern part of the Capital, where Ishira had clearly explained her clan’s main house to be. In fact, once they got there, Cessilia realized the Hashat Family’s house was just slightly bigger than the norm, but it didn’t matter much, as all of these streets probably belonged to their tribe. There were several herbal shops around, two doctor’s offices, a different, smaller apothecary, and more plant-related businesses around, like a tea shop and a massage house. For each business, there was an upper floor where the family probably lived. The apothecary they had visited that same morning wasn’t too far from there, either.

The main house of the tribe was marked with their insignia, larger than anywhere else, just as Naptunie had explained.

Even without that, though, Cessilia would have guessed this was the Hashat Family’s house. The walls were covered in a variety of ivy, and all the flowers decorating the entrance were ones that could be used to make medicine.

Just as the two women turned their heads to exchange a look, wondering if they were supposed to knock, they both noticed a movement somewhere behind them. Tessa put a hand on her sword, but the people had no intention to hide their presence. Instead, as soon as they realized they were seen, two of the triplets stepped out of the shadows.

“...I fucking knew we were being followed,” hissed Tessandra.

“Only by order of the King, Princesses. For your security...”

Just as Cessilia was about to speak up, the doors in front of them opened, revealing Ishira, two of her family servants already bowing behind her. The timing was quite perfect. She smiled politely to her guests, barely glancing at the two Royal Servants behind them.

“Evening, Princess Cessilia, Lady Tessandra. Thank you for coming to our humble residence, please come in. Feel free to bring in His Majesty’s servants... or not.”

Cessilia was a bit surprised. It appeared they didn’t mind them bringing in Royal Servants, although Ishira had been

clear about Naptunie not being invited... So this was more about the rivalry between the clans than an attempt at isolating her.

She hesitated for a second, glancing at the two young servants behind them.

"...Th-they are with us," she finally said.

At any rate, the triplets were still trained as bodyguards. If anything happened tonight, it wouldn't be bad to have them

as reinforcements, especially after the trap they had already run into the previous evening...

Perfectly composed, Ishira bowed politely and turned around to show them the way inside. The entrance of their house

was a small garden, which Cessilia immediately found beautiful. There was a small wooden bridge over a pond, so narrow

and thin it only allowed one person on at a time, but that was the only way to the mansion, and they walked across it one by

one, noticing the colorful fish quietly swimming underneath. From what Cessilia could see, the garden was only made of

medicinal plants. For every single leaf and flower her eye caught, there was some use.

"My aunt created this garden," explained Ishira. "It was her favorite place in the Kingdom... My uncle, our Clan

Leader, wishes for this place to be preserved as it is, and I have been taking care of it personally since. That's why despite

being given a room in the castle as a candidate, I do still spend a lot of time here during the day."

This explained why Cessilia hadn't crossed paths with this candidate at the castle after the first banquet, but had run

into her in one of the family's businesses instead. Unlike the other candidates, Ishira herself seemed to have little interest in

becoming queen. Cessilia remembered vividly that she hadn't been shy to speak up against her rivals in Cessilia's favor either.

Maybe she was more interested in alliances with a woman she believed to be the future Queen, like Lady Bastat. The fact that

she had already mentioned her aunt, who was probably from the Rain Tribe, intrigued Cessilia, though.

"Although this is considered our main house in the Capital," she continued, "our family is more of an itinerant one, so

my cousin, the heir to our family, isn't here at the moment. We like to travel from village to village to offer our services as

doctors, as well as study plants and remedies we can find in farther regions."

"Your businesses in the Capital aren't enough as an inflow of money?" said Tessa.

Ishira smiled, understanding the real question underlying her comment.

"I promise we're not robbing anyone. Actually, people pay us what they can, but our services as doctors are mainly

given for free. People only have to pay for the medicine, if they can afford it... We are trying to be charitable while not running

out of business. Many would love to see us fail, though."

"We heard a b-bit of your s-story," said Cessilia. "Your family b-benefited from learning medicine..."

"That's true. ...I know what you came here for, but you'll hear it from my uncle. After all, a lot of our wealth came from his marriage..."

They finally reached the actual mansion, which, aside from the beautiful garden in front, didn't seem much bigger or

ostensive as the other larger houses they had seen in the Capital. With the servants opening doors for them, Ishira preceded

them inside, quickly leading them into a small room where a man was already seated and drinking. The space was smaller than

they had imagined, but the table was large enough for six people, and already filled with food. The man looked to be in his late

fifties, with a well-kept silver beard and short hair, a thin nose and thin lips on a square-shaped face, and enigmatic brown

eyes. His long sleeveless tunic showed thin but toned muscles, and like his niece, several tattoos. He was one of those men

who might have been average when he was young, but was more attractive as an older man, with an aura of calm and dignity,

and fine wrinkles. He didn't get up upon the young women's arrival, only bowing over the table. Cessilia remembered him

right away. He was one of the men sitting during the council she had witnessed on her first day there, one of the nine lords. He

indeed was the head of the Hashat Family.

"Evening, Princesses. Please, take a seat."

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a glance and took the two seats opposite the man, while Ishira went to sit next to her

uncle, pouring what smelled like hot tea for the guests herself.

"My name is Hedrun, the head of this family, and Ishira's uncle. My niece as well as my cousin, Counselor Oroun,

mentioned the Princesses were interested in meeting me."

Tessandra and Cessilia exchanged a surprised glance. Didn't Ishira mention their Family Leader was the one who

wanted to meet them, not the other way around? Upon glancing once more, they noticed the Queen Candidate was staying silent,

as well as keeping her eyes down. They felt a bit wary of this odd situation.

That man's attitude and tone were a bit different from what they had expected. He was barely looking them in the eye

and was already busy eating, as if this meeting had little to do with him. Next to him, Ishira hadn't touched the food, either, and

was simply sitting with her hands on her lap, seemingly a bit tense, as if she was cautious of her uncle herself. They didn't look

like close relatives, more like master and servant.

"Our m-mothers were p-part of a t-tribe called the Rain Tribe," said Cessilia. "We b-believe the Hashat Family is

familiar with these p-people."

"That is true," said the leader. "My wife was one of their people. She died a few years ago, though."

His bluntness shocked Cessilia even more, and she frowned.

"We had no idea th-there had b-been other survivors in the Eastern K-Kingdom. Our m-mothers d-devoted a lot of themselves t-trying to find more of their relatives."

"Not many. Most were sold as slaves, and our tribe bought some of those slaves. Some fled, the others were killed."

Despite the leader's aloof and cold tone, Cessilia felt her heart accelerate a bit. So there really were some of her

mother's long-lost relatives in this Kingdom. According to her mother, the Rain Tribe wasn't composed of a lot of people, even

before they were attacked. To hear there were any survivors at all had been a huge relief when they expected them all to be

dead. Although she had never met those people, Cessilia was well-aware this was half of her heritage, half of her family's

story, the half that wasn't from Imperial Dragon blood, but from the sad history of a dying civilization.

"We're sorry about your wife," said Tessandra, "but are there other members of that tribe still surviving?"

"What for?"

The man finally looked at them, a hint of annoyance in his eyes.

"So your people can plunder that village again? Rape those women?"

Cessilia was so shocked, she lost her words for a second. Tessandra was the first one to react, clenching her fist on the table.

"Are you mad, old man? Didn't you listen? Our mothers are from the Rain Tribe! They went through that shit too!"

"And who do you think put them there? How do you think they became slaves? How do you think they fell into the

hands of those men? Did your daddies ever apologize for it?!"

This time, even Tessandra was rendered mute.

"...Our fathers had n-nothing to d-do with what happened t-to the Rain T-Tribe," muttered Cessilia.

"Really? How did you think they got to meet your mothers in the first place?"

"Uncle, please," muttered Ishira, uncomfortable too.

"Silence, Ishira," the man hissed. "My wife spent her whole life traumatized by the men who had beat her, raped her,

and sold her. They did the same to her whole family if they didn't kill them. Do you think I'll tell anything to two girls who

have the blood of those rapists?"

"Hey!" roared Tessandra. "Don't you fucking insult our fathers! Who the fuck do you think you're talking about? The

Eastern Kingdom was the one who raided the Rain Tribe!"

The man brutally slammed his glass against the table, making even his niece go white.

"...Say that again?" hissed the leader.

"You're not scaring me, old man," retorted Tessandra. "The Rain Tribe was raided by the Eastern Kingdom, not the Dragon Empire. Get your damn facts straight before you start insulting our dads!"

"You damn little—"

"Uncle!" Ishira shouted, panicked. "You can't insult the Princesses!"

"Princesses?" scoffed the man. "How dare they call themselves princesses, when they are the daughters of wretched murderers...!"

"...That's enough, Father."

They turned around to see a young man who had just opened the doors wide, out of breath, with a thin layer of sweat on his forehead. He was strikingly handsome, with his long, black hair over his shoulder, his muscular silhouette, and his simple but beautifully embroidered blue outfit. Even more striking was the contrast between his olive skin, and his clear blue eyes.

"Holy shit..." muttered Tessandra.

"Hephael," sighed Ishira, relieved to see her cousin.

The young man's eyes quickly circled the room, changing into a brief glare when he met his father's, and softening when he met Cessilia's green irises. To her surprise, he bowed even more politely than his cousin had.

"Princess, it's an honor to meet you. ...I apologize for my father's rudeness."

"Hephael," hissed his Father, "you shouldn't get involved in this."

"And you shouldn't be rude toward these ladies, Father. As far as I'm concerned, they are my relatives."

His words surprised Cessilia and Tessandra once again, but in a good way, this time. The young man seemed about their age, but he had no issue overpowering his father's anger with his composed but firm tone.

"...The Princesses are my guests," he said. "I'm sorry there seemed to have been some miscommunication."

"Ha! Is that what Oroun set up? Does that bastard think I am not the leader of this family anymore?"

"...I did not ride all the way here to hear your nonsense, Father."

"These women are—!"

"My mother's relatives," said Hephael. "...She'd be upset at how you're treating the few people left of her family."

The anger on his father's face literally melted away. Instead, it was as if the man had been slapped with humongous guilt. He slowly stood up, glaring at his son, and without another word, left the room. They heard his steps going away, and an awkward silence was left behind until Ishira let out a sigh of relief. Tessandra scoffed. "Well, I officially like you better than your dad," she said to Hephael. "Now, what the heck just happened?"

"I apologize," muttered Ishira.

"I'm the one who should apologize," sighed Hephael, who walked around the table to take his father's seat next to his cousin. "It seems like my father intercepted my message... I am the one who wanted to meet you and sent Ishira. I forgot my father has a bad habit of butting in."

Next to him, his cousin looked mortified. They barely exchanged a silent greeting before she helped him take off his coat and poured him tea. Hephael looked at least much nicer to his cousin, briefly patting her shoulder as he took the drink.

"We did not come here to hear our dads be insulted."

"I offer my most sincere apologies about that too. The truth is, my mother spent most of her life coldly rejecting his love, even after he freed her, married her, and gave her a son... and it is much easier blaming the other party involved than his own nation for what was done."

He drank the tea in one shot, while Tessandra and Cessilia exchanged a confused look.

"...So you d-don't b-believe the D-Dragon Empire was the one t-to attack the Rain T-Tribe?"

Hephael sighed.

"It's not a question of belief, Princess. There was a war, and a small tribe's village was caught between two rival

nations. You and I are proof the survivors ended up as slaves in both countries, didn't they? ...Although it might be hard to

admit, it's easy to know what happened. Both the Kingdom and the Empire were responsible for the disappearance of our mothers' homeland."

"...That's not exactly what we heard," hissed Tessandra, visibly upset.

Next to her, Cessilia didn't say a word. In a way, Hephael's words made complete sense. If the Eastern Kingdom alone

had raided the Rain Tribe, how would their mothers have ended up in the Dragon Empire...? That was a part of their past that

their mothers had never talked about much, either. There was too much trauma behind those memories, and it was too soon to

talk about some things. Cessilia was old enough to know her parents' history, and so was Tessandra. In fact, both girls had

experienced hardships because of it. Despite the accomplishments of the Water Goddess, it didn't change the fact that her skin

color was foreign to most people, making it nearly impossible for the girls to have a childhood like others. Not only that, but

once their mothers had found some survivors from their tribe, only a handful, they had met people who had gone through real

hardships and heard tragic stories.

Hephael sighed and put his glass to the side for his cousin to fill it again. Despite Ishira's submissive attitude, there

was clearly a silent understanding between them, and they definitely acted like siblings to each other, completely unlike the

tension with his father earlier.

"I don't blame you," he sighed. "To be honest, it took me a while to stop sharing my father's point of view as well. My mother never really recovered from what had happened to her, and her story was never really clear either. She was literally terrified of any man resembling a soldier, causing her to spend a lot of time in this house, hiding from the outside world. I

loved her, but she was a very... troubled woman, and I hope she's found rest now."

He and Ishira exchanged a glance and a little smile toward each other. Hephael gently caressed his cousin's hair. The

young woman seemed to be a lot more reassured with her cousin in the room.

"My aunt was the one who acted most like a mother figure to me, and also took care of my mother," explained Hephael.

"Because of her being unable to stand being around men, she had a quiet, secluded life. Meanwhile, my father kept leading the family outside the Capital, as we were originally travelers. I think she is the main reason we ended up here in the first place.

My mother's knowledge in medicine took our family in a new direction... leading us to where we are today."

"So your mother was the only... woman from the Rain Tribe?" asked Tessandra. "We were told there were, uh... other people with your tribe."

"Oh, there are. My mother was actually the first adult from the Rain Tribe to join the family. My father fell for her after seeing her at a slave auction, although he'd never owned a slave before. He then tried to find and buy back more of her people, trying to help my mother overcome her traumatic past. He even renamed our family after it became clear her knowledge of medicine would be the new focus of our people... The other people from the Rain Tribe he found were three young women and six children. One of the young women sadly committed suicide shortly after, and another one died in childbirth. The last one is still doing fine as of today, and she's traveling with our people as we speak. She's happily married with five children, and I'd love to introduce her to you if we get the chance."

"W-what about th-the children?" asked Cessilia.

Hephael turned to her and nodded.

"Two died of disease, but the four others grew up fine, and are actually our best doctors. They are not... fond of the

Capital, though, they live with the itinerant part of our family with their own families.

...Can I ask about your mothers? To be

honest, we have only heard from afar about the stories from the few people who could travel between here and the Empire..."

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a smile.

"Our m-mothers are named C-Cassandra and M-Missandra. Th-their maternal g-grandfather was the t-tribe's chief..."

Th-they were c-captured and sold s-separately after the attack. My m-mother b-became a slave for nobles b-before she met my d-dad and they fell in love..."

"My mother was sold to the prostitution district and worked until a patron helped her buy her freedom," said Tessandra.

"She was already a free woman when she and my aunt reunited. After a while, she actually married one of the Empress' other half-brothers, my dad and Cessi's paternal uncle. Cessi and I are actually cousins from both sides. Since then, they have both been looking for other people from the original Rain Tribe, and they've only found a handful of their descendants so far..."

"That's heart-warming to know," smiled Hephael. "...I wish my mother had been alive to hear that some of her relatives survived."

"C-can we ask her name?"

"Hendira... My mom's name was Hendira. She did mention a village chief a couple of times... but that's all I know, I'm sorry."

"It's already p-plenty," Cessilia said with a smile. "We will t-tell our mothers more of their p-people survived."

"Did you ever go to the village?"

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a shocked look.

"...It's still there?" muttered Tessandra.

"Well, there isn't much left," sighed Hephael, "but... the location is to the south of this continent. I was shocked at how it is exactly on the border between the two countries, to be honest. I went there a couple of times to pay my respects... There isn't much to see, though, so do not expect anything if you go. Grave robbers stole whatever the soldiers hadn't already taken..."

"We will g-go," said Cessilia, not even thinking twice.

They hadn't even thought about the possibility of ever seeing the remains of the Rain Tribe's village. That place had always been an enigma to them, the remnant of a memory their mothers shared with them. To think they'd be able to go was a bit unreal.

"I believe Ishira shared with you a... present."

"Th-thank you for th-that," Cessilia nodded.

"I'm afraid we don't have much more to offer, honestly. The knowledge we have is mostly what the Rain Tribe gave my mother, and what she gave us. Although we have done our best to increase that knowledge, you will have probably seen as much from your mothers."

"It d-doesn't matter. Th-this is p-proof that their p-people survived even on th-this side of the b-border..."

"It's not like we were expecting much, truthfully," added Tessa. "Our mothers were pretty... realistic even when they began searching for their people. It's good to know at least a few more survived. ...But, do you know more about who was really the first to attack?"

Hephael sighed.

"...My father's words got to you, didn't they? To be honest, I never got a straight answer either. They all said everything happened so fast, and some soldiers were fighting on top of everything... Their descriptions of their armor weren't described the same way twice, and given that they were taken into foreign lands when they'd never taken a step outside of their village..."

Cessilia and Tessandra nodded, but both girls were left to their own thoughts. Hephael was right; it did bother them a bit. When Ishira kindly invited them to start dining, the young Family Leader helped himself too.

"To tell you the truth, I think your mothers were luckier being in the Dragon Empire. No offense, but... the Eastern Kingdom wasn't exactly a great place for my mother and her peers to start a new life. They went from near genocide to a country struck by several civil wars."

"Yeah," scoffed Tessa, "we had the pleasure of meeting His Majesty..."

He briefly glanced his cousin's way, exchanging an enigmatic look with her. Cessilia caught sight of that.

"D-do you have... a d-different opinion on the K-King?"

"...I'm not fond of that man, to say the least."

"B-but..."

"I know his return put an end to the war, and he has been doing lots to improve life in the Capital. Truth be told, the White King is barely holding the clans in a relative state of peace. This isn't going to last long, sadly. We have known many civil wars to tell this much. The clans just don't get along, and one is going to overthrow the others sooner or later unless we get a more capable ruler."

"The K-King seems to b-be doing what he c-can," said Cessilia, a bit upset.

"...And although I am also not fond of the guy," added Tessandra, "it looks to me like the clans aren't making much of an effort to get along either."

Her accusing eyes were on Ishira, still holding to heart the fact that Naptunie wasn't invited. Cessilia pulled her cousin's sleeve a bit, but Tessandra ignored her.

"Since we've come here," she continued, "all we've seen are catty women fighting to become Queen, people trying to murder us inside the Capital, and someone was even killed inside the castle! None of that was the King's doing, from what we know."

"That wasn't our doing either," retorted Ishira. "That was all the other clans' doing. The Pangoja, the Yekara, even the Kunu."

"B-but... I thought the K-Kunu Tribe was dead?" muttered Cessilia.

"Those people are mercenaries, assassins," sighed Hephael. "I wish the King did get rid of those murderers for good, but the rumors are already saying they aren't gone. They might be gathering their strength and planning their revenge as we speak."

Ishira nodded in agreement before adding to what Hephael said.

"The Kunu consider themselves abandoned warriors, but they turned into nothing better than ruthless mercenaries over the years. No one had the money to employ their expensive services anymore, so they took whatever they wanted instead... The worst."

"They are what happened to soldiers once the kings that used them couldn't pay them..."

Hephael sighed and ate a couple of bites with a pensive expression.

"They are only one of the worst symptoms of a sick nation. People out of employment. Resentment, anger. People are ready to do anything to survive... even at the expense of their fellow citizens. The people who do not belong to a clan have it hard too. Many families have disappeared without anyone batting an eye for them. Roaming around the Kingdom's lands has shown me a lot of the bleeding injuries of this Kingdom."

"...We saw it too. But you think changing your ruler is going to bring peace?"

Hephael shook his head.

"Maybe not. But... we might not be the only ones thinking so."

"The stronger clans didn't appreciate the King putting small families like us on an equal footing with them," explained

Ishira. "They treat us with contempt, thinking they should still be respected like they were in times of war. They want martial law back, so they can exercise their power even more than now. Many supported the King because they thought they would get extensive rewards like with the previous King, but the treasury was long empty when the war ended, and the King isn't giving them the little bit of money the state has. He won't favor them, and that's what's making them unhappy. They believe they were wronged; however, now people need healers, food, and for all the businesses to resume."

"Thankfully for us, the Pangoja and Yekara don't get along. Otherwise, those two clans allied might be enough to take us all down. However, none of the other families are willing to follow them either. Except perhaps for the Nahaf, the other families like their independence, and would rather follow an illegitimate king."

"So aside from the two stronger clans," said Tessandra, "you're saying most of the other clans are fine supporting the King, right?"

"It's more complicated than that. Most haven't fully made up their minds yet, to be fair. They are all careful; after what happened with the previous King, they are scared to make the wrong choice again. At the moment, most think the choice of the future Queen will be what seals the deal, or adds fuel to the fire."

"...They hope the Queen will be of their clan," nodded Tessandra, "or someone they can approve of..."

"Exactly," nodded Hephael. "People have a hard time believing the tyrant's son, so we are all waiting to see what his decision for his Queen will reveal about him. Hence, all the Lords voted for this competition. It's basically a political tug-of-war."

I have to say, the arrival of a Princess from the Dragon Empire did shed new light on the game, though."

"We noticed," scoffed Tessandra. "Some are ready to support Cessi, others want to kill her. It's tense for us too, to say the least."

"I want to help," said Cessi, "but I understand the stability between the families might be more important right now."

"It might be too late for that."

Hephael put down his glass, crossing his fingers together with a serious expression.

"To be honest, most clans are already very wary of each other, and the competition exacerbated that. If something happens, I'm afraid it will be near impossible to have us work together to riposte. We simply don't have the power to oppose the Yekara or the Pangoja. We are doctors, the Sehsan are artists, and the Dorosef are fishermen. I'm making it rather simple, but when push comes to shove, it will be a follow-or-flee situation for everyone. There are only two situations out of this."

He lifted his index.

"One, we find a way to all unite, but like I said, this is nearly impossible in the current climate; it would take a miracle... or for the Cheshi to step up. They are the only other clan that all the small tribes would be willing to listen to. They also probably still have the political strength to do something. Sadly, they've been rather quiet for a while now, so we don't know what their opinions are."

He lifted his thumb.

"Two, if there were someone strong enough to support the King and help him subjugate the rebellious clans. Someone really strong, but also fair enough that the clans would be comfortable following them and uniting behind them. A strong queen would be the perfect example of that..."

"You mean someone like Cessi," said Tessandra.

"Exactly. That's why many tribes have approached you already, haven't they? To be fair, some candidates were appointed more to watch the King than to really compete. They don't care about becoming Queen, but they want to see if the King will react to them, if he even... considers someone other than the Yekara or Pangoja women."

"Turns out he does," muttered Ishira, glancing Cessilia's way.

"B-but your interest in me is b-because I'm a D-Dragon Empire d-daughter."

"Yes, and no. Putting that aside, you're also someone who's not allied with any of the clans but is still a strong contender. If I may say so, you're a big hope for many of us. It may sound strange, but many of the tribes would rather have a foreigner on the throne than a corrupt queen."

A lot of things were beginning to make more sense to Cessilia now. The other candidates tolerated her because she was an alright option for the King, and because she was essentially one of the only possible alternatives to the worst, the Pangoja and Yekara candidates...

"...Have you t-tried reaching out t-to the Cheshi C-Clan?" Cessilia asked.

"We tried, but I have no idea what they are thinking at the moment. They have closed the doors to their residences and won't appear at all. From what I know, they refused to meet the other tribes as well... They might be watching the competition as well, and waiting for the outcome."

"They are cowards then," scoffed Tessa.

A silence followed her statement. Hephrael and his cousin exchanged a glance, but obviously, they had nothing to answer to that. They didn't know what was going on with that tribe, and it did feel like they were somewhat hiding from the current events... The question was, when would they finally get involved?

"C-can I ask..." muttered Cessilia. "What ab-bout th-that woman... The K-King's mistress."

"That woman..." Hephrael frowned. "I guess you've met her."

"She said t-to ask you about her p-past."

Ishira grimaced.

"She's not one of us," she immediately said, "if that's what you want to know."

"B-but she is p-part of the Rain T-Tribe too, isn't she?"

Hephrael let out a long sigh as if it cost him to talk about this.

"...We had no idea about her existence until a while ago, honestly. She wasn't among the children my father bought back, she had... her own life, far from our family. But yes, she's... part of the Rain Tribe, like us."

"Then what is it you're not telling us?" frowned Tessandra. "You don't like her either, it seems."

"Not really. She was never a Hashat, and she sided with the King ever since she appeared... When we tried to reach out to her, that's when we learned of her background, and we immediately cut ties." Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a glance, surprised.

"...What is it?"

"She... she was born out of a rape," said Hephrael. "Not here, but on the Dragon Empire's side. Because of that, she... that girl was loathed by her mother, and raised by her father. Her father... eventually killed her mother from too much abuse, and was left alone with his daughter, abusing her next. She... freed herself by killing him, and fled here, to the Eastern Kingdom. That's when we met her, among a group of refugees. But that woman, she's still... very much damaged."

"No wonder... But she killed her abuser of a father and avenged her mother. I get the twisted part, but if you couldn't rescue her, couldn't you have... I don't know, at least helped her? I'm by no means fond of that woman, but her father was the monster, not Jisel!"

Ishira and Hephrael exchanged a very awkward look. Cessilia understood there was something more to this story.

"We would have," muttered Hephrael, "but..."

"...Her father was the one from the Rain Tribe."

A long, heavy silence followed his words. Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a look, both completely stunned. They had never imagined they would hear such a thing today.

"...Her father?" muttered Tessandra, shocked. "Holy fuck..."

"Yeah, that was a lot for us too. But after that, we understood she would not be... very fond of our family, no matter what we did. For her, the Rain Tribe is her cursed heritage, so... she went on her own." Tessandra combed her hair back, still in shock. She and Cessilia exchanged a glance, appalled at what they had heard.

They knew war was the cradle for a lot of horrible and tragic stories, but this one was truly unexpected. They were even a bit glad their mothers weren't present to hear this.

"...Is that it?" finally muttered Tessandra.

"Pretty much. It's not like she welcomed us with open arms, we barely... exchanged a few words before she made it clear she did not want our help. She was still young the first time we met her."

"I don't think she... hates the Rain Tribe, per se," muttered Ishira. "From what we understood, it's more like she has a strange fascination for it. She did learn the same knowledge as we did about medicine and plants."

"Well, I guess Daddy taught her a thing or two between beatings," grumbled Tessandra. "Great. Father of the year."

Cessilia frowned. She was still preoccupied with a lot of things Jisel had said, especially her mentioning she was a

dragon's daughter... Did she mean her heritage from her father's side or her mother's? Something was still making her uneasy about all of this.

"You said she had always b-been by His Majesty's s-side..."

"Well, that is after she reappeared," said Ishira. "We met her once, years ago, probably right after she had run from the Empire amongst refugees, but before we could find out more, she fled from us, and the next time we saw her, she had somehow become the King's right hand... and his mistress."

"In any case, she refused our help," declared Hephrael. "She is not... someone we'd trust. We suspect she has interests with the stronger clans more than the likes of us."

Tessandra scoffed. They had noticed the same, and they probably wouldn't trust that woman either. Despite her underhanded attempts at befriending this duo of cousins, Cessilia just could not shake off that negative feeling she had toward that woman... even if they somehow looked alike. Tessandra was the same; something in their instincts was constantly warning them about Jisel, something they couldn't quite put their fingers on just yet.

"All you know about her might be a lie as well," muttered Tessandra. "It's hard to know if that snake ever spits out anything real..."

"In any case, we don't consider ourselves involved with her," nodded Hephrael.

That was about all Cessilia wanted to know. Anything else she wanted to know, she would have to sort out with Jisel

herself, since it was clear that the woman's origins were still a mystery. Had she suggested they ask the Hashat just so they

would hear about her father and be less wary of her? A part of Cessilia did believe that story to be true, but she also thought some things just didn't match. She let out a long sigh and shook her head.

"Th-thank you for t-telling us what you kn-know," she finally said.

"I'm sorry it's not much. ...At the very least, if you wish to visit the remains of the Rain Village, let me know. I'll

accompany you there. I owe you that much..."

"You don't owe us anything," said Tessa. "Your father took care of the few survivors on this side of the border, it's already more than we hoped for. ...Do you think you found them all?"

"Sadly, yes. Our family has been roaming this Kingdom for long enough, I don't believe there is a village or city we haven't visited twice..."

"Even th-the ones occupied by b-bandits?" Cessilia said, surprised.

Hephrael sighed and grabbed a piece of meat to chew a bit before answering.

"Yes. Our family has managed to arrange some... understanding with those bandits. A lot of them are soldiers who have

resentment against the King or the clans, but they don't have any interest in attacking healers, so we make sure they recognize us

from afar, and let us in. We heal the sick among them for free if they don't attack us and let us through. It may sound surprising, but we are careful not to carry anything of value, only medicinal herbs, and our knowledge. We make sure to hunt or fish and eat far from them, we don't take any risks."

"Some do try to attack," said Ishira, "but we have the means to fight back too."

"...Like poisons?"

"No. Some of our men have learned how to fight, and we also tamed falcons so they could hunt down an enemy. In

short, we made sure there is more to risk attacking us than to win for those bandits.

...It's not like a lot of them are simply lying

in wait to attack us, either. The truth is, many of them are struggling to survive.

Ransacking a village provides short-term relief,

but without anyone to take care of the fields and produce the food... money runs out eventually."

"B-but it has b-been five years since your K-King... came b-back. How c-come those b-bandits haven't g-given up?"

Ishira and Hephrael exchanged a look, almost looking surprised.

"Well... It's not like all those men took those villages five years ago. They gradually left the Capital once it became

clear their master hadn't won and there would be no one to pay them. Some have only arrived in those villages up to a few months ago."

"It's not something that can last, though," said Tessandra. "We saw one of those villages the King freed, and it was already a wreck before."

Hephrael nodded, putting his hands on his knees with a very serious expression.

"I know. I happened to stop by the Muram Village on my way here, and we heard about a little group who had come

with a dragon... What you did there also helped convince me Lady Cessilia might be exactly who we need to fix what can be

fixed in this Kingdom. I will be speaking as the Hashat Family's leader now. We will align ourselves behind Lady Cessilia,

from now on. It was important for me to meet you and confirm your intentions."

"You say that, but isn't your father still the leader?" frowned Tessandra. "He did not give us the same impression."

"My father is the leader in title only," the young man retorted. "This helped me stay away from the Capital and the

King's eye. People of our tribe will listen to me, I promise. Ishira is like my younger sister as well as my representative in the

Capital. You may ask her anything in my stead, and she will provide you with anything you request if it is within our power."

Tessandra glanced at her cousin, waiting for her. Although she had been the one speaking the most, no one was mistaken

as to who was the Princess. Cessilia was quietly listening, but she was the one making the decisions.

"What if the K-King is under th-threat?"

Hephael and Ishira were both surprised by her question. They were ready to be loyal to her, but they hadn't been clear about their position toward the King, and she had picked up on that. Cessilia wanted to be sure they wouldn't run the minute Ashen was under attack himself. She might be a decent candidate for Queen, but it would all be meaningless if anything happened to the King. She was a foreigner, and couldn't become Queen if there was no one to marry... Right now, she was glad for their support, but it was all very fleeting, and conditional to Ashen making her his Queen.

Their hesitation in answering spoke volumes in their stead.

"Didn't he make you guys rich, though?" said Tessandra, frowning. "You said it yourself, the Hashat Family was like

any other before the King rose your status and gave you mansions inside the Capital."

Hephael lowered his head, nodding faintly.

"That is true, but... for the longest time, we had suspicions about the King's intentions.

See, it is not the first time a king

has risen a family's status, only to use them and abandon them afterward."

"Ashen is n-not his father," declared Cessilia, a hint of anger in her voice.

"You... sound like you're familiar with His Majesty," noted Ishira, surprised.

"The K-King has a history w-with my family. I d-didn't come here only b-because Counselor Yassim invited me. I ccame to b-become his Queen."

Hephael and Ishira stayed mute in surprise, both staring at her dumbfounded, but it was only to be expected. This was

the first time she was revealing her personal interest in Ashen, and speaking so vehemently too. Cessilia blushed a little once

she realized that and grabbed some food to try and act normal. Next to her, though, Tessandra had a faint smile on. Only at times

like this did her cousin leave her shy demeanor aside to shine, when she was determined and ready to fight for who or what she believed in.

"...See?" she chuckled. "My cousin is pretty stubborn when it comes to these things.

You guys may be fine making

promises to someone who has yet to become Queen, but you can't keep stalling and hesitating any longer. The Yekara and

Pangoja Clans you fear so much have made their choices already. It's only a matter of time before they try to overtake the throne."

Ishira's face went pale, and she dropped her cutlery.

"What are you saying..."

"It's easy to lie in wait when you're hiding behind a king you don't even trust," Tessandra continued. "You can't simply

shift your hideout to my cousin's shadow and pretend you'll be all good once this is over and sorted."

"That's not what we said!"

"Th-then m-make a real d-decision."

Their eyes shifted to Cessilia, whose green eyes looked more emerald than ever, shining and almost... reptilian. Right now, she had changed from her shy demeanor from earlier to a completely different woman. They could see the Empire's eldest Princess in her. It was as if she'd matured and grown a few inches in the blink of an eye, her presence was suddenly overpowering them. Even Tessandra seemed to have taken a back seat behind her. "I will side with K-King Ashen," she declared. "If your family simply waits for me to b-become Queen t-to openly support me, I won't c-consider your intentions as g-genuine. I will not accept a c-coward, even if they are related t-to my mother."

"How can you call us cowards?!" exclaimed Ishira. "We have been doing all—!" Before she could finish that sentence, her cousin grabbed her shoulder and had her quietly sit back down, his eyes on Cessilia. Hephrael was clearly more lucid about the Princess' clear warning, and more realistic too. He had underestimated her because she seemed to be of a kind nature like her mother, but right now, she had the aura of a War God's daughter...

"You hide far from the C-Capital and b-behind your father," Cessilia continued. "You want t-to support me, b-but you are not ready t-to take action. The other c-clans have already t-tried to k-kill me, and they will k-keep on doing so. I c-can't trust p-people who are all t-talk and no action."

"...What about the other tribes you met?" asked Hephrael, frowning. "I thought the Princess would be more willing to trust our Hashat Family, but it looks to me like you're asking us to be on the frontlines while letting the Dorosef and Sehsan remain hidden."

"N-Naptunie and her uncle are with us every d-day," retorted Cessilia, a hint more anger in her voice. "No one ignores the fact that the D-Dorosef Tribe is now my ally."

"And don't you think you, of all people, should be more supportive of us than the Sehsan Tribe?" added Tessandra.

"You knew who we were, our common ties to the Rain Tribe's legacy, but they reached out to us first, and even offered an opportunity to trade with the Empire, knowing full well how risky that was."

"I b-believe the Hashat should b-be more p-proactive than them. Your family might only b-be healers, but you're p-powerful enough to openly d-display which c-candidate you will support. D-did you even consider that the smaller families might be looking up t-to you?"

The two of them exchanged a glance as if really surprised by her words. They clearly hadn't even considered the

influence they had over other tribes.

"We... Well, we don't mix with the other families..."

"You should s-start," Cessilia coldly retorted. "You're one K-Kingdom, one p-people.

You c-can't act like you d-don't

care what happens t-to each other anymore and p-push the liability onto others.

Otherwise, th-there is no use in waiting for a qqueen.

You are all already letting the other c-clans win by not d-doing anything. If the t-tribes d-don't unite together against

those c-clans, neither the K-King nor I will be able t-to do anything. Your passiveness will b-be the downfall of this KKingdom."

A heavy silence followed her words. Ishira looked as if she had just been slapped

awake, while her cousin's face held

a stern, indecipherable expression. Neither of them could say a thing, and Cessilia was done talking too. Next to her, Tessandra

was simply re-filling her own plate with more meat, a satisfied smile on her lips.

"...I see we underestimated the Princess," finally muttered Hephrael.

His cousin glanced his way, looking a bit worried and unsure about what was going on now, keeping her lips sealed.

Meanwhile, Hephrael grabbed the teapot and refilled Cessilia's cup himself, an obvious gesture of submission from someone

who had his cousin serve him all along.

"I'll admit, I was raised to put the needs of my family first and foremost. Never did I envision the day would come so

soon when I would consider partnering up with other tribes. Our knowledge in medicine was always sufficient to maintain our way of life."

Cessilia looked a lot calmer now, but she accepted the cup of tea with a faint nod, bringing it to her lips gracefully. She

took a sip and put the cup down before talking again.

"The b-best doctors learn not from other d-doctors, but from other c-cultures. The Sehsan T-Tribe can sew th-things in

better ways than I have seen b-before, and I want to t-try their techniques on fresh

wounds. The D-Dorosef know the pproperties

and nutritious values of fish and have s-studied algae so much they c-can use it for health b-benefits as well. No one

is only g-good at one thing, b-but if you c-combine many p-people's talents, you learn and improve even faster."

"If you keep yourselves to yourselves," added Tessandra, "you are bound to hit a slump sooner or later. No offense, but

I'll bet your medicine hasn't improved much from what your mother taught you already."

Hephrael and Ishira's expressions betrayed them before they could even come up with a response to that. Eventually, the

young leader sighed, defeated. He didn't look like he had lost to Cessilia in any way, though. In fact, he smiled confidently,

slowly nodding.

“Lady Cessilia, you exceeded my expectations, by far. I did not expect to be lectured today, but I’ll bow down without shame to your words. You’ve proven not to be a princess in name only, but a woman of character and great insight, and I respect that. In fact, I am more confident than ever in supporting our future Queen. I will set my doubts about King Ashen aside for your sake, and trust the King the lady has chosen. ...If you prove yourself as our future ruler, I will also step up, as you requested. The Hashat Family will no longer hide. How can we prove our loyalty to you?”

“Hephael,” muttered his cousin, a bit worried about what she could ask.

Cessilia’s answer came right away.

“Reach out t-to the other t-tribes,” she said in an imperious tone. “The Sehsan, the D-Dorosef, and even those who have yet t-to take a side. D-do not wait for me; c-create an alliance with them.”

“...Aren’t you worried we’ll create an alliance in favor of another candidate?” Hephael raised an eyebrow.

“I d-don’t believe you will b-be able to b-betray me if you c-can’t agree on another c-candidate. We know most of the smaller t-tribes have chosen a c-candidate without real b-belief they will be p-picked by the King, b-but now, you have an opportunity t-to take a real stance, b-by supporting me.”

Tessandra loudly put down her own cup, giving them a cunning smile.

“On a side note, I’ll add what Cessi here is too nice to tell you, that you guys really better not dare betray us. Our

family has a history of cutting off toxic relatives. ...Quite literally.”

“We will remember that,” nodded Hephael, the corner of his lips lifted. “However, we are not liars or traitors and as my lady mentioned, we won’t keep acting like cowards either. ...I’m sure you’ll see the result of this very soon.”

He was most likely referring to the upcoming banquet, but Cessilia didn’t need to inquire any further. She smiled back

at him and they resumed eating as if this conversation had been very natural. For the rest of the meal, they didn’t mention

anything else about tribes, conspiracies, or rival clans. In fact, they quite happily chatted about their medicinal knowledge and

the differences between the Empire and the Kingdom. Each side of the surviving Rain Tribe had perfected their knowledge

according to the new ingredients and herbs they had found, and Cessilia was quite happy to chat about their respective

discoveries with Hephael and Ishira. They had asserted they were probably something like distant cousins, and now that the

hardest and most serious part of the conversation was over, they were acting quite familiarly. Tessandra and Hephael happily

drank together, each boasting about their talent for handling alcohol, while Ishira and Cessilia much rather enjoyed staying

sober to discuss more complex medicine. Each duo had begun more naturally leaning toward each other, and Cessilia noticed how Ishira smiled while staring at her cousin.

"You t-two seem close," she whispered.

"Oh, in my heart, Hephael is as close as an older brother. We were raised together by my mother, and since we don't have other siblings, it was always just the two of us. He's always been very protective of me since I lacked a father figure.

...You have many siblings, right, Lady Cessilia? Are you close to them as well?"

"I am." Cessilia smiled. "I have two older b-brothers, and they d-do tend t-to be very p-protective, b-but they are

nice... I have f-five younger siblings t-too."

"It must be nice growing up in a large family! It was always just me and my mother. My father died when I was young,

and my uncle never cared much for us. He was always too concerned about his wife, and almost jealous about how close my

mom had gotten to her... unlike Hephael. My cousin always made time for me and my mom who helped raise him, despite

taking on a lot of responsibilities since he was young. I knew he was growing up to become the Family Leader, so I did my best

to become one of our best healers as well. Just so I would be useful to him. He never pressured me to get married, either; I'm

the one who offered to volunteer as a candidate."

"Really? B-but his father..."

"My uncle is... a sad man," Ishira muttered. "Although we don't approve of his ways, neither of us really blame him.

After tonight, I guess Hephael will take his position as the official leader, to make your request doable... My uncle won't agree

to it, but he'll step down. He already knows who our family will follow."

Cessilia didn't answer that, only glancing Hephael's way. The young man seemed to be having fun with Tessandra, far

from the serious Family Leader he had acted as just before. It was one fun night for the four young people, now that they had

become closer, and it did feel like they belonged to the same family.

"...Do you believe you can do it?" she asked. "Become our Queen?"

"I b-believe it."

Cessilia's answer wasn't arrogant or hesitant. Despite her stutter, she had said it the most calm and honest way

possible, not even blinking.

"Good," smiled Ishira. "I'll hold you to that. And then, I hope our nations will be able to create ties again. It's my

dream to visit the Dragon Empire."

"Really?" Cessilia asked, a bit surprised.

Ishira blushed and nodded. She suddenly looked a bit younger, finally acting like a young woman her age rather than a

family representative. It was obvious she had finally let her guard down with Cessilia. She leaned a bit closer, like a friend about to share a secret.

"I am rather admiring of your mother..." she whispered. "Since I was a child and heard of her achievements, I always wondered what kind of woman she was, to free herself from slavery and become such an important healer for an empire. We don't have many examples of women becoming such important figures, except for the Empress, of course, but... the Empress is almost akin to a scary deity, while your mother's love story with your father has... crossed the border as a tale that would make more than one girl dream."

Cessilia felt a bit strange, hearing about her parents in such a way. She knew their story was quite unique, but she had grown up observing them, and she was somewhat used to it. A close, loving family was the norm for her. She knew by heart the way her father's dark eyes always looked for her mother, like a dragon fiercely guarding its treasure. Meanwhile, her mother was the pillar of their family, the one they all gravitated toward. In a way, perhaps she had always been influenced by those two and their love story. Cessilia had never been interested in boys before she met Ashen, and once she had met him, there had never been anyone else for her...

"...My g-grandmother has a theory that d-dragons only have one real p-partner in their life," said Cessilia. "My father's d-dragon knew my mother was th-the one f-for him since the moment he saw her." "That's even better than what I had heard," smiled Ishira. "...Do you see the King like that too?"

"M-me?"

"I saw how your eyes changed each time we mentioned His Majesty... and I have seen you two in the same room. He might not be a dragon, but the candidates are all jealous because it's clear the King is different with you, Lady Cessilia.

Honestly, you make it easy for us to give up on this competition... No one wants to pursue a man who only has eyes for one woman." Cessilia wished this was true. Sadly, there was more than one woman still aiming for Ashen, and they wouldn't give up easily.

Thinking about the rivalry for the King's heart, or at the very least the position of his Queen, made her long for him more. She glanced out the window, noticing how the sun had gone down already. On the other side of the table, Tessandra looked a bit too drunk, but it made her smile. At least her cousin had fun and forgot about her love troubles for a short while. It did feel like they had made new friends, if not, new relatives.

She decided it was time they left the Hashat cousins and politely bid them farewell, after thanking them for the meal.

Hephael promised he'd keep to their agreement, and Ishira added they'd always be welcome in their properties. The young woman wasn't going back to the castle that night, instead, staying there to discuss some of their family affairs with her cousin, so Cessilia was left to take a staggering Tessandra back by herself.

"T-Tessa, you've really overdone it t-tonight," she sighed, helping her down the street. "Sorry, their wine was damn good... Oh, I should have asked Mr. Handsome what it's called or something..."

"M-Mr. Handsome?" Cessilia repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh come on Cessi, he's easy on the eye, isn't he?"

"Yes, b-but... he's almost a r-relative. And what about S-Sabael?"

"I don't want to talk about that idiot! He can keep brooding and ignoring me if he wants, I do not care for him anymore!

I don't care! I'd rather go and lick a dragon's butt than see him again!"

"Oh. That's a bit harsh..."

The two girls stopped and turned around, only to see a blushing Sabael standing awkwardly behind them. This time, he wasn't wearing his armor, only a plain white shirt that was still open enough to show his muscular torso... Cessilia was a bit surprised to see him there, but judging how close they still were to the Hashat residence and the direction he had come from, it looked like he had been waiting for them to come out. She realized he might have gotten a little tip from his sister on where to find them. Cessilia smiled, a bit relieved to see his sorry expression, and his two different-colored eyes on her cousin.

Tessandra, however, wasn't of the same opinion. She glared.

"There he goes, that coward. He's done for the day, and he has the guts to show up, with that sexy get-up too! Who do you think you are, to appear all hot like that in the middle of the night?! I'm not tempted at all! It. Does. Not. Work!"

Confused, Sabael looked down at his outfit, completely unaware of his own charms.

Cessilia couldn't really blame her cousin, the young man was indeed quite attractive, even more so while wearing fitted clothes rather than heavy armor. His leather pants and boots were dark and highlighted his silhouette, and a blue, colorful scarf was tied around his waist.

"S-sorry," muttered Cessilia. "She's a b-bit drunk..."

"I'm not drunk! And I am not tempted to jump on that sexy pirate! ...Where did you get such a girly scarf? Why would you wear what another bitch gave you?! I haven't had a chance to buy you anything yet! Take it off!"

"T-Tessa!"

"I-it was a present from my sister!"

Cessilia was almost more shocked to hear Sabael genuinely trying to explain himself apologetically than her cousin's shameful behavior. Ignoring him and Cessilia's attempts to hold her back, Tessandra staggered up to the young soldier and angrily tried to take off his scarf. Her fingers were unable to untie anything in her state, but having her fidgeting around his waist area made Sabael blush uncontrollably, and he didn't even dare try to stop her. "Uh... I'm... sorry..." he muttered, his eyes down on Tessandra's uncontrollable hands. "Shut up," she retorted. "Shut up, you and your mouth. I don't care! You're an idiot, and you're... you're..." "I'm sorry," he muttered again. "I didn't mean to act cold this morning, but I was just surprised, and I needed to collect my thoughts..."

"Shut up!"

Tessandra's shouting was assuaged with a violent slap on his torso that cut his breath. He coughed a couple of times, his eyes opened wide in surprise. Behind him, Cessilia grimaced.

"I'm sorry, S-Sabael," she said. "T-Tessa gets a b-bit hard to handle when she's d-drunk..."

"N-no," muttered the young man, trying to regain his composure. "I'm the one who made her upset, I should be able to handle this much... It's my fault!"

Tessa suddenly grabbed his collar and kissed him. Sabael was so stunned, he kept his eyes wide open on Tessandra and froze completely. Behind them, Cessilia facepalmed.

"G-goodness, Tessa..." she muttered.

Right after, Tessandra ended their kiss, her hands still on Sabael's collar with a proud smile.

"There!" she exclaimed, visibly satisfied. "Now, you're mine!"

"Uh... th-thanks," dropped Sabael, at a complete loss of what else to say.

"Shut up," retorted Tessandra, frowning. "You shut up. Don't add anything."

"...Sorry."

"I'm sleepy," groaned the willful young woman. "Take me to bed."

Behind them, Cessilia was completely at a loss. She had seen Tessandra become a handful when drunk, sometimes too

violent as she didn't control her strength, and willful too, usually toward her dad, but never with a man her age. She silently

apologized to Sabael but, much to her surprise, the young Royal Guard didn't seem offended at all. He sighed, and as if it was

natural, lifted Tessa up, letting her wrap her arms around his neck and rest her head on his shoulder. Curled up in the soldier's

arms, the young warrior didn't seem so feisty anymore. She was probably going to fall asleep long before they reached the

castle. A smile appeared on Cessilia's lips, although it was likely her cousin would flip over all her bold actions the next

morning...

"S-sorry about this," she muttered to Sabael. "T-Tessa was b-bit uneasy about what happened th-this morning."

"...You probably mean my attitude," sighed Sabael. "My apologies, I just needed... a bit of time. I've never been with a lady like Tessandra before. I'm not used to... bold women. It made me... a bit insecure as a man."

"...What a-about now?" she asked carefully, glancing at her cousin's peaceful figure.

"I am still working on it. ...But I think running from Lady Tessa isn't going to give me the answers or the resolution I need."

Cessilia smiled, relieved for the two of them. Sabael wasn't as stubborn as he seemed, and he was a good man.

Becoming the interest of a girl like Tessandra was likely forcing him to reconsider the values he had grown up with, as well as

challenging his own pride. It probably wasn't easy, but he had come back anyway.

Perhaps those two would be able to find the key to their understanding after all.

For a little while, neither of them added anything, both lost in their thoughts while on the way back to the castle.

Cessilia hadn't drank as much as her cousin, but this little walk helped her shake off that bit of tipsiness, and instead, her heart

was gradually filled with expectation. It was a bit late, but she hoped Ashen hadn't changed his mind on their date.

"...Princess, watch out."

Sabael's nervous voice took her out of her reflection. He had stepped in front of her by reflex, but she could still spot

the large, hooded figure standing ahead of them, right outside the castle's gates. It was a bit unnerving to cross paths with an

imposing silhouette like this in the middle of the night, but Cessilia immediately recognized that familiar frame. Her heartbeat

accelerated a little in anticipation, and she put a hand on Sabael's shoulder.

"I-it's alright," she said. "C-can you g-go and p-put Tessa to b-bed for me?"

"...Are you sure?"

Cessilia nodded, catching a glimpse of shiny, white hair under the hood.

"Yes, d-don't worry. N-Nana should still b-be up, t-tell her not t-to wait for me either."

"...I understand."

Although he hadn't recognized his King under that hood, he politely nodded at the large man standing in the way, and

made a little detour around him, still carrying Tessandra, a cautious expression on. He was confused as to what was going on,

but he knew not to ask. Cessilia watched him walk away and disappear inside the castle with Tessandra.

As soon as he was out of sight, she almost ran to Ashen. He opened his arms just in time to hug her tight, burying his

face into her large curls.

"I missed you..." he whispered against her ear.

"I m-missed you t-too... D-did you wait a long t-time?"

"I saw you coming back from afar, I wanted to greet you as soon as I could. ...Who was that?"

"S-Sabael? He's Naptunie's b-big brother..."

"...Is he interested in your cousin?"

"Yes... T-Tessa has been the one ch-chasing him, b-but I think he has feelings for her t-too."

"...Hm. Good, then."

Cessilia frowned, a bit confused why Ashen would care about Sabael and Tessandra's relationship... until she quickly

remembered that she had touched Sabael's shoulder. She blushed.

"Ashen... Are you j-jealous?" she muttered.

She had expected him to deny or laugh it off, but instead, he very gently caressed her cheek with his palm, pulling his face closer to her.

"...If they see what I see, I can't blame them for falling too."

His words made her blush even more as soon as she understood them. Yet, the King gently put a kiss on her lips, a

naughty smile on. His lips were a bit colder, and had a faint taste of beer that evening.

Had he been drinking too? Despite the

misty wind blowing from the ocean, Cessilia's body warmed up instantly to the King's touch. The way he was tall enough to

cover everything else had something a bit intimidating yet exciting about it.

However, even hidden under a cloak, his tall silhouette was hard to conceal. The guards making rounds around the

castle kept glancing their way, probably wondering who that couple was shamelessly reuniting in front of the doors...

"L-let's go," Cessilia suggested, pulling him inside.

Ashen didn't follow her lead, though, and instead, wrapped his arm around her waist to take her to one of the side

streets away from the castle.

"We're having our date outside," he whispered. "I promised I'd make you see my home, didn't I?"

Cessilia's excitement increased immediately, and she let him lead her.

Chapter 15

Since she had almost only ever seen him inside the castle, Cessilia couldn't help but be a bit excited about the two of

them going on a date outside. Being so close to Ashen, in a foreign country, and

spending time together incognito was like a

dream come true. They were like any other couple going down the streets, holding each other close and acting lovingly. It was

as if Ashen refused to part with her for even a second. Even as he kept his arm around her waist while walking, he made sure

his coat was also partially covering her, and from time to time, would secretly surprise her with a peck on her hair or temple.

Cessilia was only just now realizing how long the two of them had been due for some time alone, with no eyes on them, no bodyguards or servants around.

The streets of the Capital were already incredibly quiet for that time of night. It wasn't even that late yet, but they only crossed paths with a few people on the way. The shops were already closed and people were rushing to get to the safety and comfort of their homes. No one really paid attention to the tall couple walking away from the castle, quietly flirting with each other...

"Aren't you cold?" he asked.

"N-no, I'm fine."

Cessilia was always a bit embarrassed at how little she could control her emotions around Ashen. Her heart was fluttering and her cheeks turned pink every single time. She could act strong and smart with anyone, but with the white-haired King, she was back to her innocent thirteen-year-old self again. It was a warm feeling, but she was always a bit afraid he would find her too childish. She tried to keep her breathing steady and stand tall next to him. If she hoped to really become his Queen, she needed to graduate from her childhood crush to turn this into a proper relationship...

It was strange. She had always felt confident, but not so interested by men's curious gazes on her. Cessilia knew she was pretty, but she also knew her cousin Tessa was prettier than her, and she wasn't interested in making herself particularly stand out either. Things were only different with Ashen. Each time she saw him, there was this terrible desire that surged within her, like a bold, feisty creature whispering in her head. She wanted his attention, his love. Something had definitely changed from her younger days now that she could experience proper desire. She wanted to always be a little bit closer to him, and to attract his dark eyes. She hated any woman near him, and the mere thought of Ashen being with another woman would make her irrationally mad. That creature was a bit scary, but it was also empowering her. Cessilia felt much fiercer, like a female dragon ready to protect her territory. He was her man. The only one for her. "We're here," he suddenly whispered.

To her surprise, they had stopped outside a house like any other, just slightly bigger, perhaps. Nothing was making this house particularly stand out from the others in the same street. It was a two-story house, with a deep blue roof in a quiet alley.

The neighborhood did look as if it was nicer than most, and there was no one outside, just a few street lamps every four or five houses to light the way.

The house in front of them looked like it hadn't been vacant long, or it had been taken care of so nothing really looked out of place. However, there was a heavy lock on the door, and all the windows were boarded up. A little sign was even put up front to tell people to stay out.

"Th-this is your... house?"

"The one I was born in and grew up in, yeah... the only place I kept good memories in." Ashen's expression was quite solemn as his dark eyes kept staring at the building in front of them. Cessilia couldn't

quite decipher his gaze, but there was something a bit... sad in it. The King himself seemed to be staring with mixed feelings, a hint of nostalgia in his dark irises. After a short while, he took out a little key and went to open the lock. It opened up easily, and the King took the heavy chain off the entrance door. Cessilia could see the almost painful expression on his face.

"D-did you c-come back here before?"

"Once or twice... when being in the castle gets too bothersome and I need to be alone. Sometimes I just stand here, though; for some reason, walking inside is the hardest part. No one else knows I bought this house back. I don't... I don't even really know why I bought it."

He slowly pushed the door, which didn't squeak, or even make a sound. Everything was so solemnly quiet. They stepped inside in an almost religious silence.

This ought to have been a pretty house a decade or two ago. The white ceiling was high, with pretty, wooden arches

between the different rooms, and large, glass windows. A thin layer of dust was covering the wooden floors and the furniture,

but everything else was kept in good condition. It would take but a week to put everything back into a usable state again. It was

hard to imagine Ashen had grown up here, though. He was standing there awkwardly, staring around as if he had no idea what

to do. Cessilia took his hand without looking, and he held hers back, as if to reassure each other with their presence. They both

looked like strangers intruding in that quiet, forgotten space. There were stairs going up, but from what Cessilia had seen

outside and the height of the ceiling, the second floor was probably an attic and wouldn't be high enough for their tall figures to stand.

"Our bedroom was upstairs," muttered Ashen, whose eyes had followed the same path.

"Me and my brothers... It was

big for three boys, back then. We could run around and play in every nook and cranny...

Now, I doubt I would be able to stand in there."

"...You never t-told me about your b-brothers b-before."

"I know," he sighed. "...There's a lot I wasn't ready to tell you back then."

He took a deep breath, and turned to the small kitchen. The glass window was letting gentle streaks of moonlight gleam over the once white tiles. A pretty basin had been carved in the middle, and small hooks were still hanging from a rail.

Although it was all empty now, it must have been stuffed with all sorts of dishes and food before. There were still a few stains on some of the wooden parts. Some of the cupboard doors were left open, and Cessilia wondered if someone had previously ransacked this house.... Spiders and dust hadn't been able to fully conquer the little cupboards yet. Cessilia slowly walked up to the kitchen, noticing a silver pitcher forgotten in the corner. It still had a bit of water in it. Little glass pots were lined up against the window too, one of them with small dried flowers still in it...

"My mother used to cook for us there," muttered Ashen. "That's the place I most easily remember her at. I'd always see her back, while she stood there and cooked. She used to hum songs while cooking, to put my youngest brother to sleep when she carried him. As soon as I got big enough, she made me cut the fish and meat because she hated to do it... She was the one who first taught me how to hold a blade."

"...What happened to her?"

"...She died from disease." Ashen's brows furrowed. "She and one of my younger brothers both passed the same winter. We didn't have money for medicine... and no doctor in town. Back then, this Capital was still as dangerous as the villages you've seen out there."

"B-but your father..."

Ashen scoffed.

"The General... he didn't live here."

He turned around, and walked up to one of the large wooden pillars, smiling at the old, decrepit wood. Thanks to the moonlight shining through the windows, Cessilia could see his glowing white hair, and his lonely figure as his fingers followed the wood print. At around half his height, there were clear cuts made, like those done to mark a child's growth, with names on it. The highest one didn't even reach his waist.

"I have... no memories of my father ever setting foot in this place. It was just the four of us. ...You heard that my mom was his mistress, right? God knows how many that bastard had... He lived a few streets away from here. They met like any other couple would have, from living in the same city, but their situations were different. My mom was from a family of merchants. Poor, but independent. On the other hand, my father was born into a family of servants. He was raised to serve someone, learned how to do many tasks, and follow orders. The nobles he served were corrupt, like most of them were back

then. My father was smart enough to realize those things young, although he was told to stay silent and obey.”

Ashen sighed, and turned around to an empty corner of the room. There was a little couch there, undoubtedly made by a skilled artisan. Cessilia could see it in the way the wood had been beautifully carved, and how the timber resisted despite the long years... Was this his mother’s family’s doing? The remaining pieces of furniture were those which had obviously been too heavy to steal and transport. Once she walked up to it, Cessi realized the only thing remaining was this one piece of wood; the other parts like the seat pillows and back cushions had been taken away. Her fingers followed the beautiful lines of the wood while Ashen resumed talking.

“The more my father witnessed the nobles’ corruption, the more he realized he could rise above his birth situation. He studied secretly, and learned from their corrupted ways... I heard he was good at kissing their feet. He was probably ready to do anything that could improve his situation. He was... disgusted with his master, but he still sought the protection and security nobles could provide. He even began stealing from the nobles, slowly putting money aside for himself. He probably realized marrying my mother wouldn’t be his best choice either. He never intended to marry her, even as she got pregnant. He only wanted to keep her as a mistress on the side... I still don’t really understand how they somehow stayed together.”

Ashen turned around again, walking back to the center of the room, and turned his hand into a fist, right before punching one of the arches, a bitter smile appearing on his face.

“This opportunistic bastard... When the war against the Dragon Empire began, he enrolled himself into the army, thinking he’d come back covered in money and glory. You know how the war went... my father barely survived. He made himself just small enough to flee and return with the soldiers who hadn’t been killed as soon as our Republic yielded. My mom gave birth to me around that time... and he got her pregnant with my brother when he got back. But my father still didn’t want to marry her, or even acknowledge her. Instead, he acted like a war hero, and somehow got recognized for his achievements...”

Ashen looked almost disgusted. Had his father really done things worth being recognized and awarded, or had he lied his way to his position, like he had done with his sons’ mother? It was hard to tell. Either way, Ashen was speaking like the boy who had been deceived and disappointed by his father, many times.

“He rose through the ranks somehow. Corruption worked well for a coward lost in a chaotic land... He became known

as the Great General Ashtoran... and gladly got married to a noble's daughter when he got the opportunity. By then, the Republic was already on the verge of collapse, and the nobles were ready to do anything to keep their lands and wealth, including marrying their daughters to popular soldiers... For my father, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get himself a noble title, money, land, and a wife fifteen years younger than him. I guess it was worth throwing aside the mother of three of his children."

Cessilia felt terribly sorry for Ashen.

She didn't know any of this before. When they had met seven years ago, he had never said a word about his family, or even where he came from, his past. Her family had taken care of a broken, young man, who had lost all will to live...

She slowly walked up to him, and grabbed his hand again. She felt Ashen's fingers gently hold hers back, and he slowly turned around, but his eyes went to the names on the wooden pillar.

"I had... to watch my father rise and become a beloved king with a family that wasn't us from afar. People recognized him in the streets, and his new, young wife had already given him more children. Why would he have cared about my dying mother and brother..."

His voice broke a little on those last words, the heartbreaking sound of anger and sadness combined. Cessilia could feel all of those painful memories through their skin's touch. How did the young Ashen feel, watching the castle from afar where his father was living with another family? What had his mother felt after being abandoned by her children's father? How did those boys grow up, sons of a King that didn't care for them...? The more she heard, the smaller this place felt. Perhaps their mother had been able to care for all three boys long enough that their childhood wasn't unhappy, but the truth was still there. Ashen, being the oldest, had probably known all of this better than his younger brothers... and had been angry in his mother's stead.

"...D-didn't he t-try to help you at all? When your m-mother fell sick..."

Ashen scoffed.

"You probably heard about how my... father's reign went. He was so obsessed with his new power, he increased the people's anger toward nobles, and became the worst tyrant to have ever led this nation. So many people were executed... At first, it was seen as necessary because the Kingdom was in such chaos, but as time went by, all those deaths felt less and less justified. My father even had his own wife's family executed, claiming they had committed treason, when he himself had stolen

from them for years. He was in a hurry to get rid of everyone who could have hindered his newfound power, I suppose... Those who weren't supporting him were against him, simple as that. Even his wife didn't dare to speak up. I feel sad for that woman, but at least she was spared from the disease and hunger that took over the streets. The bodies accumulated outside the Capital became a nest for disease, and with the money already lost in the war and so many people having been executed, things were going too fast. The officials didn't have time to properly confiscate and redistribute the dead's wealth; people began to steal what they could to survive, even if they risked execution for that." This matched Naptunie's words about her childhood... A time of fear and death. The peace the new General-turned-King had brought had become the seed for an even worse era. It was hard to think Ashen was speaking about something that had happened just a decade ago when she had seen the beautiful, peaceful streets of the Capital now. It only emphasized how hard he had worked to undo all of his father's past mistakes...

"What ab-bout you?" Cessilia muttered.

Ashen scoffed.

"When my mother and brother fell sick, I was left alone to care for them. At first, Mom claimed they'd be fine with a bit of herbs, but I could see what was going on in our streets. The bodies and the sickness that was spreading... All the decent doctors had fled the Capital, or died trying to help others. I could steal and hunt well enough to provide food, but I had no knowledge in medicine, and my mother and brother were not getting any better. My little brothers cried day and night for so long... At some point, I got desperate enough that I tried to ask for my father's help... He was a stranger to me, but I knew enough to hope he wouldn't leave us this way. I knew how rich he had gotten. So I swallowed my pride, and I walked there, ready to beg for help. But the doors to the castle remained closed for a nobody like me. No one knew I was the Great King Ashtoran's son."

Cessilia felt her heart sinking, hearing this. She could feel the extreme anger and sadness in his voice. Ashen couldn't see her, even as she gently hugged him. His eyes were lost in dark, painful memories. "I waited outside for days, asking again and again for my father. The guards refused to open up. The King didn't receive anyone... not even some kid who was claiming to be his bastard."

"...I'm so s-sorry."

Cessilia's voice was breaking a bit. As if she could feel all of his sadness, she felt like crying too, and she could only try to repress her tears. This was so horrible to even imagine. The young Ashen, desperate to save his family, and a father that

never acknowledged him. The amount of time he ought to have spent alone outside the castle's closed doors, waiting, praying, hoping for some miracle, or someone to help his dying family...

After a short silence, she heard him sighing and to her surprise, Ashen hugged her back, his fingers gently combing through her curls as if she was the one in need of comforting. She heard him sigh faintly.

"...As you can guess, they didn't make it. My brother and I buried them in one of the communal graves, like anyone else... and we did our best to survive on our own. We stole and held on to this house for as long as we could. There was no work in the Capital, and nothing anywhere else. The King's reign had brought so much more anger and fear, civil war was already threatening to explode in the third year of his reign. His wife's only son was killed by his enemies, and their two daughters had died young... he was probably desperate for an heir. That's when my father suddenly remembered he had fathered a few bastard sons. I swear, the day he showed up at our house, expecting to find our mother with us, I was ready to fucking murder him... but I didn't, for my younger brother's sake."

"Your f-father t-took you in b-because he wanted... sons?" muttered Cessilia, shocked.

"Yeah. He believed that establishing a proper dynasty would make him more legitimate... Perhaps he was even inspired by the Dragon Empire, since the Princes' popularity was supporting their father's. Because his sons were street children who had faced difficulties like others, he thought it would be even better suited for his plan. I did not take his return well. He apologized to us, and made up some sob story about how we were his long-lost sons... I didn't believe him one bit, but it was still better to accept his newfound love for us than to risk losing my brother and dying in the streets. So I swallowed my pride, and let him take us in. I admit, he gave us all the wealth we had never even dared to imagine. At first, I was relieved, but I slowly realized he had become just as corrupt as the nobles he had once hated for it... When I began to call him out on it, he got mad, and sent me to train with his soldiers as an apprentice. I turned out to be decently good, so he sent me even more, to calm down his angry vassals and repress the rebels. He only needed one of us, so he probably thought my brother would be enough, and me expendable. I was just fourteen at the time, but I was so bent on not letting anyone break me or kill me... I became good enough for those men to respect me despite my age. Ironically, I did much better than he had expected. I somehow became the new pride of this father I had loathed for so long. He used the fact that I was away to pretend to love me from afar, saying I was

doing everything in his name, thinking no one knew how bad our relationship really was. But I never hid that our relationship was bad. When people realized I did come from the street and didn't share my father's rotten values, they were even more ready to listen and follow me. Unlike what he had hoped, the more he sent me out to the battlefield, the more my reputation grew, and his diminished. For a while, he wouldn't dare to touch me, but he also knew I was turning into the biggest threat he had ever faced."

Cessilia felt a chill run down her spine. This father-son rivalry couldn't have ended well, but she had a feeling things were even worse than she thought. From what Yassim had told her, she remembered Ashen had been seemingly murdered by his father's enemies... However, this didn't match what she was hearing now. Why would they have killed their best hope at a change? Between a selfish king and a people-devoted, upcoming, strong, young prince who wasn't afraid to oppose the tyrant, the choice should have been easy.

"...What happened?"

"Realizing that me being on the field wasn't serving his interests, he got me to come back to the Capital more and more often, despite me doing my best to stay away. The only reason I had to come back was my younger brother. Until, one night... I woke up to the screams of my stepmother. I already knew my father's wife wasn't happy in this marriage, but I had always thought it would be better for me not to involve myself with that woman. My brother had a different opinion. Unlike me, he lived in the castle and interacted with her more often than me. He had... walked in on our father forcing himself on her. Not just once, but repeatedly. She hadn't chosen to marry him, and she probably had enough of being his thing. In fact, she was closer in age to us than she was to our father, and... my brother couldn't leave her alone. He hadn't told me anything, but he had probably resolved to protect her if my father sought for her again. He was still a boy, though... My father didn't take it well. His wife was his property, you see. A good bought from his former master that he was not ready to let go of. A trophy... That night, when my brother begged him to stop assaulting her, and got between them, he refused and instead, he attacked my brother."

"Oh, G-God, no..."

She felt Ashen's grip tighten around her shoulders. She could feel his apparent calm was like a storm under the surface.

He was merely repressing his anger from that memory.

"...I arrived too late. I barely got a grasp of the situation... I couldn't save him. He had tried to act stronger than he was,

and didn't want to involve me... My stepmother was injured too. Her screams and sobs still ring in my ears sometimes... It was the most horrible sound I've ever heard. My father was already half-dragging her out, but she wanted to go to my brother's body. Perhaps there really was something between them... Once she saw me, she probably realized I was in danger too. She begged me to run. But I couldn't simply turn my back on my brother's murder. Bare-handed, I tried to attack my father. He had his sword in hand, and it would have only taken him one blow. Just one. What happened next, I am not sure. The next thing I knew, that woman was stabbed in my stead, and I was pushed, falling out of the window. The last thing I saw was my father's hand, grabbing her hair and pulling her back inside. ...I lost consciousness when my body hit the sea."

Cessilia shivered. She had seen the sea so many times from the castle's windows, she couldn't imagine anyone falling from that height and surviving. It explained the many, many scars on Ashen's body, though, and the terrible state they had found him in...

He gently caressed her hair.

"I have no idea how I survived that fall, nor how long I spent adrift at sea. There was a storm that night, but I didn't drown. I still believe the gods favored me somehow, for how I was lucky that I fell on a side without rocks that my body could have crashed onto, or how the waves pushed me away from the Capital. When I woke up, my body was floating along the Pseha at dawn... and the river took me all the way up to the north."

He suddenly cupped Cessilia's cheeks between his hands, and had her look up to him, smiling at her. All the sadness from earlier seemed to have somehow disappeared, replaced by his gentle, relieved expression.

"That's when a curious little princess and her dragon found me, half-dead."

Cessilia blushed, but smiled back at him. She knew what had happened next, this time.

"...We f-found you in the n-north," she muttered with a smile. "I r-remember. You were d-drifting, and c-covered in remnants of b-blood... I th-thought you were already d-dead when I c-called my brothers to d-drag you out..."

"Without your mother, I probably would have died," muttered Ashen, "and without you, I would have chosen to."

He let out a long sigh and kissed her forehead, very gently.

"I thought... I had lost absolutely everything. My home, my family... I thought it was time I gave up on life. There was nowhere to go home to, absolutely nothing I wanted anymore."

"You d-didn't talk for so long," Cessilia remembered. "We th-thought you were m-mute for real."

"I was... depressed. I had no will to live left. I thought... your family's kindness was unnecessary. I didn't get what I could possibly want from life, after everything that had happened. But, unlike my expectations, I didn't die. Not only did I not die, but you were almost... dragging me back to a normal life. I was shocked that your family didn't expect anything from me. You healed me, fed me, and clothed me without expecting anything in return. You were just... happy to have me around."

"You helped with the chores. It was more than enough..."

"No, you don't get it. If it had been just me, I would have probably found a place to let myself die, or jumped off a cliff or something... but I couldn't do that after your mother had spent so much time healing me. Plus, you just weren't leaving me alone. You had no idea what was going on inside my head, but you still wouldn't let go of my hand, and you took me everywhere with you, and you were so... innocent and pure and kind. You didn't care that I didn't talk, you'd show me your world, anyway. The smallest things made you happy, and you shared them with me. You were like... the sun to me. More than any of your siblings, I was always attracted to your smile, your gentleness. How you cared for all your younger siblings made me feel like... there was someone else like me, devoted to their family. That the choices I had made so far made sense, that it wasn't all... worthless. That there was always someone, somewhere, who could need me. Even if they weren't my family. I realized you had taken me from having no will, nothing I wanted, to me needing you." Kissing her forehead once more, he then slowly moved to join their foreheads together. The two of them breathed so slowly, it felt like everything around them had suddenly gone incredibly quiet and calm. As if it was just the two of them left in this city, the other's skin the only source of warmth. Their faces were so close, but they kept their eyes closed, neither of them moving, both lost in those blessed memories they created years ago.

"Your home became my paradise. Despite my grief, I felt happiness like I had never before... I was healing, slowly. Both my body and my mind. You were the best medicine, and I was... addicted to you. Every day, I was looking forward to your expressions, your movements, your smiles. I wanted to see what you'd do, what would make you happy or excited. The way you smiled at your mom, and how small you were next to your father. How strong the bond was with your siblings... It was like watching a dream from afar. I didn't expect to be part of it, but of course, your family wouldn't hear of it. You don't know how everything your family did was precious to me. Kassian and Darsan treated me like a brother... Your mother was there to

listen when I needed to talk. Your father... took me under his wing, and taught me how to be a real fighter. Your parents knew where I came from, and perhaps, they figured I'd go back someday, so they prepared me, the best they could."

Cessilia knew. She could remember the blessed days where she had spent the whole day watching Ashen and her brothers train together. How he had become a part of her family, someone she genuinely loved. Until her feelings had gradually moved to a different kind of love, along with the months. She was young, but this was when her first feelings as a woman blossomed. Ashen was handsome, hard-working, honest, and kind. Perhaps she had felt a bit of his feelings for her too, but Cessilia had a hunch that, even if he hadn't loved her, she would have fallen in love with the boy from back then. She liked how calm and composed he always was, his gentle movements that spoke more than his few words.

She smiled, and gently caressed his cheek, looking into his dark eyes. His face was framed by his silver-white hair, gleaming under the moonlight. His hair wasn't completely white when they had found him, but it already had a handful of white or gray strands... as if Ashen had been three or four times his real age. According to her mother, it was something that could be caused by stress, or poison, but this was an extremely rare condition, with no known cure. As if his body had needed to express all his trauma, in some way... The discarded Prince was well-fed, and had a strong body, but his scars and white hair were proof of all the hardships he had gone through.

"You're s-strong," she muttered. "I d-didn't know how much you endured b-back then. You d-didn't show any of it..."

and when you c-came back, you d-did what you c-could, didn't you?"

Ashen sighed, his expression darkening.

"...You know I didn't choose to come back," he groaned. "When... your father told me to leave, he said I should go back

and finish what I had started; I never thought he had been training me all this time with the idea to send me back and let me conquer my father's throne. At least, not so soon. The way he... banned me from the Empire was so sudden. I felt like I was

falling down from that window again, losing everything and everyone I cherished. It was like being thrown back into hell after

tasting paradise for more than two years. My hair turned completely white then, I think.

...I didn't want to go back, but once I

was back in my Kingdom, I realized there were truly people who needed me."

He took a deep breath, his eyes going down on the sword at his side.

"...In the end, I obeyed your father. I started from scratch, letting people believe what they wanted about my supposed

death... My father had used my murder to gain sympathy, so when I got back, everything crumbled under his feet. People had already endured two years of civil war, they were more than glad to see me appear to put an end to it."

He scoffed bitterly, a disgusted smirk on his lips.

"...Killing him was almost too easy," he chuckled bitterly. "He hadn't trained in years, he was no match for me, who

had been trained for two years by the War God himself. Plus, those who were still debating on who to follow against him were

only too happy to rally behind me... like the nine clans. I knew some of them didn't do it only for my sake, but I figured it was

better to let them follow my lead and deal with their expectations later. It only led to where we are now..."

He let out a long sigh. Despite how young Ashen was, he already had faint wrinkles, too many scars, and something

incredibly sad and wise in his dark eyes. He had already lived one too many lives, it seemed. Cessilia smiled, and gently

pulled his face closer to kiss him.

"...My King," she muttered. "You've really gone through a lot, haven't you?"

He smiled. He liked the way the Dragon Princess said this, with a hint of possessiveness in it. Ever since she had

appeared again, he was rediscovering the girl he had once known bit by bit, unveiling how she had grown into a strong,

beautiful, and determined woman. Still, the more he learned about her, the more unworthy he felt. He didn't want to be that

weak, anger-filled boy anymore. The same way he had turned from a prince to a king who had fully taken his throne with his

own power, he wanted to be a strong and reliable man to Cessilia, not the self-centered bastard he had shown her all this time.

He took a deep breath, and answered her kiss back.

"...Let's leave," he said.

She nodded, and he gently pulled her hand, the two of them leaving the house. Cessilia glanced back once more before

they stepped out. Even if this place was filled with melancholy, she could feel it had been the home of some happy days too.

Hopefully, it would be able to host more in the future...

"...Now you know," Ashen sighed once they were outside. "...I'm sorry it took me so long. You're the first person to

know all of this... about my past."

"Thank you for t-telling me," she said calmly, "...but it d-doesn't change anything, Ashen."

His hands froze on the lock he was busy putting back. He finished locking it, and turned to her, taking her hand with a

worried expression.

"...What doesn't change? What are you talking about?"

Cessilia sighed calmly, and caressed his cheek once more.

"You're still a p-prince, in their eyes... a p-prince they want t-to manipulate to d-do their b-bidding. You haven't finished the t-task my father sent you to do. Finish what you s-started here. End the wars and b-bring peace to your home ccountry."

"Cessilia..."

"I'll help you," she added with a gentle smile. "D-don't worry. I'm stronger than you th-think, and so are you. We c-can do this... together."

Ashen hesitated for a few seconds, caressing her cheek with a solemn look.

"...I know. But... I am afraid I'm going to involve you in something you shouldn't have to go through if it wasn't for me.

Given a couple more years... maybe you could have come when I had finally pacified this Kingdom."

"And m-maybe you wouldn't b-be able to d-do it without me," Cessilia calmly retorted.

"Ashen, I chose to c-come

here. It was n-not on a whim, b-but by my own choice. It's n-not just about you. I have some things to p-prove to myself t-too. I

j-just chose to d-do it b-by your side."

The King remained silent for a little while. A part of him was still desperate to protect her at any cost. Since he had

learned what she had gone through after he left, and what had happened to her dragon, Ashen felt an even bigger sense of

responsibility toward Cessilia. In his mind, he had already been granted a miracle just to be able to meet her once more and to

have her by his side. But if anything happened to her because of this Kingdom's political intrigues, it would be entirely his

fault...

While he was lost in some dark thoughts, the Princess unexpectedly slipped her hand into his. He glanced down, a bit

surprised, but Cessilia looked very calm, simply leading their little stroll away from his childhood house. He held her hand a

bit tighter and they kept walking in silence, just enjoying each other's presence, and the quiet streets around them. With no one

willing to stay out late, it looked as if time had stopped in the streets of the Capital. The night sky was beautiful too. The moon

was bright and full, only obscured once in a while by a lonely cloud.

"I really like th-this city," she whispered.

"It wasn't always this calm and quiet. Ten years ago, you couldn't walk three streets without risking being robbed or

getting into a fight... The wealthier people hid in their houses and could pay for their security, but for everyone else, it was

quite the challenge just to survive..."

"Nana t-told us about her childhood here too..."

"Yeah, she probably experienced it from a... more privileged point of view. At the very least, the clans, even if they

were still more tribes back then, could protect each other. For people with only their families to rely on, it was... hard."

Cessilia nodded, and they kept walking. Knowing the history of this place made her even prouder about what Ashen had managed to do with it... Bringing back peace and security had probably been the very first step to healing this country from its deep wounds. Even if it was just beginning with the Capital, it could at least show that with time and the proper measures and leaders, the other cities would improve too. It was just a matter of time, and if they could find the right people...

"What about C-Counselor Yassim?" Cessilia asked. "I heard a b-bit from him about his r-relationship with you, bbut..."

Ashen grimaced a bit.

"He told you he used to be my teacher?"

"Yes..."

"He was also my father's way of watching me. For as long as I stayed in the castle, Yassim would be stuck to me. On the surface, he did teach me a lot of things, and gave me an education but... he also reported every single one of my movements to my father. I never really knew which side he stood on, and while I grew under his watch, I felt like this cunning old man was watching me as much as my father was. He was grooming me to become the perfect prince. I had one of the sharpest educations thanks to him, and I caught up on everything in a matter of months under his teachings. My mother had taught me the basics of how to read, calculate, and write, but Yassim took me to the level of this Kingdom's scholars... For this, at least, I am grateful to him."

"Was he ever s-strict?"

"Yes. But he wasn't... inflexible, or too rude. At times, he was even the one to suggest I go back to the field, to take a break from my studies. It was as if he knew exactly which point he could push me to before I'd really give up, or get mad. At that time, I was working like crazy. If I wasn't fighting, I was studying. I knew my brother's survival and mine relied a lot on how useful we were to our father. I only had in mind to grow strong enough to protect my brother and try not to upset my father... too much. You remember my father was... looking for heirs, at some point?"

"Yes? B-but... It was just your b-brother and you, wasn't it?"

"Not exactly. In terms of blood-related sons, yes. However, my father had other... sons. Orphans that he had chosen himself, and who were trained every day to become stronger. I think he always had a hunch that my brother and I might not be enough, or... devoted enough to him. I barely met them, but unlike me, those men were desperate to please my father and to

become his real heir. Me coming into the picture didn't really please them, and they were constantly looking to annoy me or my younger brother. Yassim taught three other boys, as well as me."

"What happened t-to them? Yassim said he helped you escape the C-Capital, but..." Ashen scoffed.

"...That's what he claims. I don't know what the truth is, but I do think a cunning old man like him could easily try and lie his way out of it. As I said, I lost consciousness when my body hit the sea... but my father sent men to find me, and kill me.

His other sons, to be exact... Yassim said he saw me fall from another window of the castle. He went to find my father, but found him in a rage, yelling orders to either confirm my death... or finish the job. When he understood that his students were sent out to kill me, he rushed out of the castle to try and save me. According to him, they could see my body drifting... He claims he tried to stop them, and stood between me and their weapons. As their former teacher, it did make sense they were reluctant to shoot him. He stood there until my body disappeared across the waves, but more of my father's men arrived before he could search for me, and he was taken and jailed."

"I see... So you really d-don't know if he d-did try to save you?"

Ashen shrugged. They were now slowly heading southeast, following some of the larger streets, but Cessilia thought she recognized the way to the Fish Market or at least its general direction. The smell of the sea was getting stronger around them too, and she could hear the waves, their sound growing from afar.

"No. Everyone else who was involved was either killed or fled god-knows-where away from here. He could very well be saying this to keep his head. I was reluctant to kill my former teacher, but... he keeps doing things that go against my will, and putting the little trust I have in him in jeopardy."

"Like when you sent him t-to find you a... princess?"

Cessilia's eyes were full of kindness, which made Ashen hesitate. He could see she already believed in the old

Counselor's upright character, but he didn't think the same. In fact, when Yassim had come back with her, Ashen was even more furious. Although it was easy to make the link between his fake death and disappearance of two years in the Dragon

Empire, how could Yassim have known about his tie with the Imperial Family? He hated that the Counselor had brought

Cessilia, of all people. Not because he didn't want to see her again, but because it made him worry about the old man's intentions toward her. Despite his gentle smile and clear eyes, Yassim was harder to decipher than anybody else. He had

begged Ashen to spare two of his former adopted brothers upon his return and even hid them, the same ones that had tried to

kill him... And when he had tried to banish the old Counselor once and for all, he came back with the most unforeseen candidate of all. Thinking back now, it felt more and more like the Counselor had his own plans, and intended to use Cessilia against him.

"Just... don't trust him," he finally said. "Most of the time, I feel like that old man is just ready to do anything to save his neck... He is the only counselor that used to serve my father that I kept alive. Even the Clan Leaders are wary of him. Most of them don't understand why I kept that cunning old man alive when I cleared out most of my father's followers. Sometimes, I wonder the same. But I just... He did protect me from my father's wrath a few times. He was also my brother's teacher, and I know I owe him for being half of the King I am today."

Cessilia smiled, and gently caressed the back of his hand with her thumb.

"It's g-good that you are giving him the b-benefit of the doubt," she said. "Maybe the C-Counselor just wants to stay alive, b-but... if he was really a b-bad person, I don't think he would have t-traveled all the way to the Empire to ask me to ccome."

"Don't you think he did it to use you against me?"

Cessilia sighed. After years of being involved in political conflicts and war, it couldn't be helped that the King was so doubtful of everyone's intentions. Even more so for a man who had once been his father's advisor too... However, Cessilia thought of herself as a pretty good judge of character, and she never felt any ill intent from the old Counselor. In fact, Yassim seemed to genuinely care for the King, enough to risk his own life to bring him a new potential wife... He could have been killed so many times on his way to and from the Empire.

"He d-didn't know about our relationship, Ashen," she muttered, gently grabbing his arm with her other hand to get closer. "...I think Yassim is just hoping t-to show you there are... other p-paths than the one you've t-taken."

The King remained silent for a while. For some reason, he didn't like Cessilia defending another man. After a while, he shook his head.

"...Let's stop talking about the old man. We're almost where I wanted to take you."

"To t-take me?" she repeated, a bit surprised.

She hadn't realized he had been purposely guiding their steps until now. Earlier, she had realized they were clearly headed toward the sea, but to her surprise, Ashen took her away from the port and the Fish Market, even farther east, to the end of the island that constituted the Inner Capital. For a while, it seemed like they were going to reach the coast, but, as they reached the last lines of houses, Ashen took her through smaller, narrower streets. She had never been to this neighborhood

before, and the fact that they were headed to a destination he had picked made her heart flutter. The paths between the houses became so narrow that she had to let go of his arm, and while still holding hands, they went one behind the other through the little paths.

"Where are we going...?" she whispered, a bit excited.

"You'll see."

The smile on his face when he glanced over his shoulder made her heart skip a beat. Ashen didn't smile often, but he was irresistible when he did. He was usually so serious, closed, and stern, his smile was even hard to imagine. Yet when he did, he suddenly seemed a lot younger, and so handsome that he made Cessilia blush instantly. He was like a young god in all his glory. She held his hand a bit tighter, and followed him with the excitement building up in her stomach.

Finally, they reached the very end of the coast, past the last deserted streets, gardens and trees, where there was nothing else other than the sea, for as far as their eyes could see. Because the waves were so quiet tonight, it felt beautiful, almost eerie, with the moon lighting up the shimmering surface of the water. Cessilia thought they'd admire the view, but to her surprise, Ashen kept pulling her along.

"Here," he said.

To her surprise, she saw him go down some invisible trail past the coast, and realized there were stairs built into the rocks. They would have been impossible to see, if someone didn't purposely stand almost at the edge and looked down to their right. The stairs had been very roughly cut too, so there weren't two the same, and they had to go down slowly to avoid slipping. It would have been impossible to use it if the weather hadn't been perfectly calm... Only on a night like this, with no wind and no rain, was it safe to go down. Cessilia had to hold up the hem of her dress, and Ashen went down very slowly too, holding her hand securely at each step she took.

They passed in front of little holes in the rock, some bigger than others, and before they got there, Cessilia had already guessed what kind of place they were headed to.

The cave wasn't very large, but it was certainly beautiful. The stairs were taking an abrupt turn to the right, and there was a very small pathway inside, where they had to stay close to the wall on their right, while on their left, the sea waves gently came and went, filling a little river that went deeper inside. Despite the small entryway, there were other holes higher in the cave that the moonlight was shining through, illuminating the cave and its river in a gorgeous, blue-white light. For a while,

she thought the river water was shimmery white, with dozens of little colored pieces at its bottom, until she looked closer. A bed of white seashells. The beautiful seashells were paving the entire river bed, along with pieces of blue or green frosted, smooth sea glass. Because the water depth was so shallow and the waves gentle, it looked like a shimmering mirror reflecting the moonlight in even more beautiful colors. Cessilia's breath was taken away.

"It's beautiful..." she muttered.

Surprised, Ashen suddenly stopped walking and turned to her. He was staring so intensely, Cessilia blushed helplessly.

"W-what...?"

"Just now, you... you didn't stutter."

She blushed even more, and lowered her head, nodding weakly.

"It happens... s-sometimes."

Ashen smiled and closed the distance between them in a couple of steps.

"So you like it?"

"It's a b-beautiful place." Cessilia nodded. "How d-did you find it...?"

"My mother showed it to me and my brothers years ago. According to her, only a few young people knew of its existence when she was young... I guess most people living in the Capital now have no idea. It's impossible to get here most of the time. It takes the perfect weather conditions that we rarely have here, and a low tide. We can only stay here for... perhaps two or three hours before this whole place gets filled by the sea again."

Cessilia was amazed. This was such an ephemeral and beautiful place. To think this place possibly wouldn't be available to anyone for a few days, before becoming such an enchanting place again...

Ashen smiled and turned around again, pulling her deeper into the cave. There were little holes going deeper, but they couldn't be accessed by a human. The floor was humid, with a thin layer of half-dry sand, and some seashells forgotten by the tide scattered around them. Cessilia couldn't help but try to avoid stepping on them on the rocky floor. Ashen took her to a little area that was about one step above the little river, dryer, and large enough, around the size of a small room. He took off his large, thick fur coat, and put it down on the floor for them to sit on it. He sat first, inviting Cessilia to join him. She sat shyly next to him, admiring the view they had on the little river and farther away past the cave entrance, on the large Eastern Sea.

He gently pressed his lips against her shoulder, before taking the back of her hands to his lips as well.

"I know it's not as great as the wonders of the Dragon Empire, but... I wanted to show you the best of my world."

"It's t-truly amazing, Ashen. I love this p-place."

To his surprise, Cessilia leaned in and initiated a kiss between them. The King answered her kiss, his breathing a bit

unsteady. His lips against hers were trying to keep up, yet holding back a bit, as if he was afraid to lose control. He was frowning faintly, looking almost... in pain. Cessilia liked this restraint about him, though. She smiled, and while their lips parted, she caressed his cheek gently.

"Aren't you... c-cold?" he muttered.

"You're the one with a s-stutter now?" she chuckled.

The King blushed a little. He couldn't hide his troubles, but the Princess found him even more charming when he was embarrassed and visibly torn inside. She smiled and put another quick peck on his lips.

Then, she stared right into his eyes and putting her hands around his neck, she moved to sit across his lap, straddling him. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest, but she had never felt so confident and bold. She smiled at him.

"...I'm never c-cold," she said, a dash of pink on her cheeks.

His breath taken away, Ashen grabbed the Princess' nape, and pulled her in for a wilder kiss.

The heat rapidly increased around them. Their damp and hot breathing and their wild kiss made any thought about the cold irrelevant. It was just the two of them, in their little world, kissing and caressing each other. The memory from that morning was rekindled in a matter of seconds, making them both lose their hesitation to indulge in some tender exchanges.

Cessilia loved that he never wore a shirt, and left his torso bare for her to caress and touch. It was like a vast, warm, and soft land under her fingers.

He kept caressing her, but as he was hesitant to undress her, Cessilia took the first step, slowly undoing her leather belt and tossing it aside, taking her arms out of her sleeves, the dress naturally falling down to reveal her skin. Ashen's breathing stopped for a second, and she saw him gasp very faintly, as if breath-taken.

"You're... beautiful," he muttered.

He wished he had words closer to the truth of what he was experiencing right then, but none seemed enough to describe

the vision of the young goddess facing him. It was enough to make his heart wrench in pain. She was down on her knees, a bit

higher than him, and he was admiring her from below, completely blown away by her mythical beauty. Her skin was glowing

like cold gold under the moonlight, circled down by a myriad of her dark, walnut-brown curls. Cessilia's striking green eyes

had a more teal shade from the water reflected in them, and her lips were a bit purplish from the makeup that had been wiped

off earlier. With only the nacre and seashell jewelry left, and the blue fabric streaming down her body, she was like a sea

goddess, or a mermaid, who emerged from the sea to ravish his heart.

Like a mere mortal man, he had no power to resist her call, his own barely restrained desire building up within. His hesitation blown away, his hand came to her body again, running over her skin, caressing each curve. For a while, he couldn't even think of kissing her. He was too busy looking at the gorgeous woman she had become. It was like a fantasy in front of him, a dream so real he could barely believe it. It felt almost... forbidden. A sin a man couldn't resist. The appeal was strong, and his resolve weak. They both wanted it, and her eyes said so too.

"You're b-being shy again," she muttered, as if amused, putting a soft kiss on his lips, like a cold caress.

It was just enough to entice the two lovers some more. He claimed the next kiss, and soon enough, they were exchanging kisses slowly but passionately, as if tasting each other. They could feel each other smiling in between, happiness overflowing.

Their hands were picking up the rhythm too. Cessilia's hands were following the strong lines of his muscles, and crossing paths on his back. Ashen's fingers were more sensual. He was already caressing her hips, leaving his fingertips on her inner thighs, making her shiver from a mix of excitement and nervousness. She was a bit embarrassed to be left in her underwear already, but there was no denying the heat beneath the fabric. He began caressing her over the fabric, making the Princess blush helplessly again. She had been so bold seconds ago, but now, her inexperience was starting to catch her up. Meanwhile, Ashen slowly moved his kisses from her lips, to her cheek, her jawline, and then her neck. Much to her surprise, he paid special attention to that part of her body which usually made her shy. Cessilia felt his butterfly kisses, all over her scars, so faint and soft she almost felt like crying. He was melting all of her insecurities away with his gentleness. Silently telling her it was alright, that he loved that part of her too. It felt like he kissed every single inch of her throat, and for once, she felt as if there was nothing there. No scar to constantly pull on her skin, get itchy or dry. The place she had lost all sensations in seemed to be revived under the King's tender kisses. She almost felt like crying in relief, as if that part of her had been healed somehow.

Then, just as she was getting a bit soothed, Ashen's lips progressed further down, exciting her again. This time, one of his hands grabbed her breast, sending a new dash of red on her cheeks. Cessilia had never really considered her feminine allure, but now, she was receiving unexpected sensations from her chest. It was like her extremities were connected right down to her lower abdomen, and sending delicious signals of pleasure from the King fondling them. Leaving her inner thigh to hold

her hip and the other hand on her breast, Ashen licked the other, suddenly focusing on them, making Cessilia gasp in unexpected pleasure. Her two ends were so sensitive, each lick and caress was like sweet torture, electrifying her whole body without warning. She had no idea a woman could experience such things from her small bosom!

"A... Ashen," she cried faintly.

"...I like when you call my name."

He smiled, and moved to kiss her lips again, letting her breathe a little. Cessilia moved her hands, one still combing his hair as they kissed, the other exploring the lines of his abs and lower abdomen. She didn't want to stay too passive. After all, she had been the one to initiate this! She shyly moved her hand toward his pants, a bit unsure what to do next. She found an opening, and gently began touching him too. She didn't have the courage to be too bold, but caressing the hot flesh was already bold enough, in her mind. Indeed, the King's dark eyes suddenly lit up with a new fire, making her hot too. She watched with a bit of excitement as his breathing became louder, and he moved his hips a bit, allowing her better access to his lower body. It was still a bit scary to imagine what was going to come next...

After a short while, Ashen grunted and, as if to even her movements, placed his hand between her legs again. He was much more direct this time, and Cessilia moaned as his fingers drifted under the thin piece of underwear. The sounds her wet flesh immediately made from the rubbing were so embarrassing, she closed her eyes, unable to look at him, and tried to focus on her hand's movement. She listened to Ashen's breathing, so close and so hot. The sounds echoing in the cave were completely erotic right now, the faraway sound of waves wasn't enough to hide it anymore. Her own voice took her by surprise when she realized those coquettish cries of pleasure came from her. She realized her hand was slowing down on Ashen's hard rod, but it couldn't be helped; the heat between her legs was overwhelming.

"...Come here."

Ashen's unexpected mature and dominating voice sent a new shrill to her lower regions, and Cessilia felt herself tip backward before she could realize it. To her surprise, she found her back against the fur, her legs spread, and Ashen's smiling face over her.

"What are you d-doing?" she muttered, embarrassed by her new position.

"Trying to please my Queen," he smiled, before going down.

His mouth against her opening made her yelp without thinking. Her panties came off, and the cold wind she felt was quickly taken over by his hot and moist breath. She gasped, her lower abdomen torn with excitement. She slightly arched her

body without thinking, but the movements of Ashen's tongue made her legs weak. It was hot, humid, and totally obscene, but her cries of pleasure came before she could stop them. The thoughts of his experience with this were quickly blown away by how good it felt. A bit strange, but there was no mistaking it: her shameless lower half enjoyed this. Cessilia had never imagined sex was this crude and unfiltered, despite her mind in a hot daze. She hadn't thought much about it, but this didn't feel like something that could be dreamt, more like a sheer, raw piece of reality. She closed her eyes again, focusing on her sensations, and Ashen's shoulder and hands under her fingers. She wanted to enjoy this, and feel herself as a woman under his caresses. It was all about letting her inhibitions go, and trusting the other. Soon enough, she felt her insides become embarrassingly wet, and her lower abdomen begging for more...

"Ashen," she called to him. "Ashen, p-please..."

He stopped and gently placed a trail of kisses from her abdomen to her chest and neck, all the way back up to her lips.

Her lover had a strange taste now, but she didn't hate it. He kept kissing her lovingly, while his lower body moved between her legs, a bit impatient despite his clothes... Cessilia smiled and playfully grabbed his butt.

"You temptress," he groaned against her chin.

"T-take it off," she ordered with a smile.

He grunted, struggling to take his pants off without moving from his position too much; Cessi's arms around him wouldn't let go. Finally, he was naked above her, and with a smile, the Princess grabbed his shoulders, making him roll to the side so she'd be the one on top.

"Let me d-do it," she said from above him.

He nodded, his hands grabbing her hips, and pulled his head up for another kiss.

"Go slow," he muttered.

Cessilia nodded, but slow or not, she felt ready. Never had she felt more like a woman than right now. She took a deep breath, trying to remember the few pieces of advice she'd heard before, and slowly rubbed their intimate parts together. The slow teasing made him groan and breathe louder, but she enjoyed feeling her body more and more ready... Finally, she gradually went down. Despite her breathing, she could feel his thickness push against her walls, a bit painful. Ashen's hand on her waist was guiding her, though she could tell he was holding himself back from just pushing in. A sharp pain made her grimace, but she didn't shy away from it, only going down further, focusing on the good sensations to occult the rest. Despite the pain, she could tell there was also something... fulfilling. His heat inside her felt... good. She breathed loudly and slowly moved, holding on to his torso while going back up and down.

"...Are you alright?" he asked in a whisper.

His husky voice excited her a little. She could tell he was enjoying her insides pressing around him, and it made

Cessilia smile and forget the pain a bit more. She bravely moved again, stubbornly looking for genuine pleasure. The pain

wasn't as bad as she had imagined, but it wasn't going away. Cessilia ignored it, and kept going, her graceful body gliding up

and down. It was like a dance on his body, a search for that perfect harmony. The sound of their flesh slapping began to

resonate in the cave, along with their heated breathing; Ashen grabbed the curls around her neck and pulled her in for a kiss,

trying to tame his instincts. Her narrow walls were driving him insane. He wanted to ram in savagely, yet the still rational part

of him was terrified at the idea of hurting her. His manhood was sucked in and out, making him grunt in helpless pleasure

already. The slow back-and-forth was akin to torture, pulling his sanity and desire further and further from one another. Without

thinking he began moving under her, his hands grabbing her hips and taking her with him. Cessilia cried out, in pleasure this

time, and barely held herself from falling, holding on to his shoulders, her mouth constantly open to let out successive moans.

They had found a rhythm, a little rough but not savage. She could feel his pounding resonating throughout her entire body, the

waves of pleasure slowly obliterating the pain. Her breasts were bouncing above his face, her hair covering them like a

curtain. Sometimes, they'd find a way to kiss, but there was no slowing down, only the awkward, jerky, irregular breathing and

their lips trying not to miss each other.

"Are... you... alright?" he asked in between his pounding.

Cessilia nodded helplessly at first, trying to catch her breath.

"I like it," she muttered. "I like it... Ah! Ah... I... Ah... I like it..."

He smiled, and kept going, perhaps a bit more restless. His manhood wanted more, and he could feel she had grown

more used to him. Their exchange was wetter, hotter... He moved to sit up, letting her wrap her arms around his shoulders, and

moved his hips and her butt a bit faster. His excitement was taking over, but he could tell he was close to release, and her cries

had turned into excited screams. Trying to keep his last restraint, he thrust again and again, listening to Cessi's voice and

focusing on her to finish. He looked for her eyes, staring at her dazzling beauty, the thin tears shining in her eyes, and her cute

flustered expressions. His eyes narrowed briefly, and he found his release, pulling out almost one second too late. He grunted,

gushing against her hip, and let out a long sigh of relief. Cessilia's breathing was still hot and loud against his ear, and he

moved his hand again, caressing her while his arm was holding her close. She cried again, her nails scratching his back when he teased her little button, but he now knew the sound of pleasure in her voice. He kept going, making circles on her entrance with her own fluids, making her hot and breathing hard again.

"A-Ashen..." she cried.

"I love your voice, Cessi," he gently whispered to her, caressing her hair.

His hot, deep voice was the trigger she needed. Something brutally sparked in her lower abdomen, cutting her breath

and making her gasp. It wasn't what she expected, but it was a new sensation, and definitely pleasurable. She took several long

seconds to take it in, feeling her breathing slowly calm down. Ashen's hands were gently caressing her legs, letting her come

back to her senses by herself. When Cessi opened her eyes again, she met with Ashen's, and they smiled at each other, in a

strange daze. Without a word, they slowly pulled closer for another tender kiss. Their bodies against each other, caressing each

other's hair, they kissed slowly, only focused on the other, forgetting everything else.

There was nothing special about this kiss.

It was a kiss like many others between two lovers, but it had an unbearable, almost painful taste of happiness caught in a

fleeting, fragile moment.

When they quietly parted again, Ashen left a gentle kiss on her shoulder.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," Cessilia muttered, a bit embarrassed. "You d-don't have to ask so much..."

"Sorry, I'll stop now. ...Then shall we bathe a bit?"

"C-can we?"

"This water should be fine, it's not deep at all and surprisingly clean. As long as we don't fall asleep."

Cessilia glanced back and, indeed, the water was rather clear, for seawater. Plus, she had been intrigued by it for a

while now. With Ashen's help, she got up, surprised by the lingering sensations in her body. She didn't think her insides would

feel so strange after sex, but she didn't mind it much. It was like proof she wasn't a virgin anymore...

Ashen went in the water first, carefully stepping on the bed of seashells and shivered.

Then, he forced himself to dip his

whole body in, although it wasn't that deep. He looked surprisingly good with his white hair wet. Cessilia joined him quickly,

trying to ignore how naked she was in front of him. After all, it was too late to hide, and she didn't want to act shy. She bravely

stepped in after him, finding the water at a good temperature thanks to her natural body heat.

"I love this p-place," she said with a smile.

"I knew you would... I'm happy I brought you here."

For a while, they swam around and teased each other, playing with the water. However, just as Ashen had said, it was rising rather quickly. Cessilia noticed the water that was previously at their waist was soon almost to their shoulders, and the path was already under a couple inches of water when they went to retrieve their clothes.

"Let's go," said Ashen, taking her hand after they both got dressed. "I don't want to have to call your ride to get back..."

Cessilia chuckled, amused. She could only imagine what Ashen would risk if Krai found them there... She glanced one last time around the cave and carefully put one of the seashells she had collected in her pocket. It wasn't the largest or probably even the prettiest she could have found, but it was intact, in good condition, and she liked the size of it. She had taken just one, for memory. If this cave was their secret she could only visit once in a while with him, at least she'd have a memento until the next time...