

The White King's Favorite

Chapter 26-30

Chapter 26

The space wasn't as confined as before, but it certainly wasn't ideal to fight twenty people at once, either. Everything was happening at an incredible speed, and from the very first second, both Ashen and Cessilia quickly realized Yebekh hadn't exaggerated his men's strength; they were nothing like the ones they had fought earlier. The amount of pure strength used in that battle was unbelievable, and each clash of swords was incredibly brutal. Soon, the two lovers were forced to stand back to back to protect each other, and had to move quickly to keep up with the attacks coming from all sides.

Their enemies were also experienced enough to not let the space become an issue; they scattered around their opponents, sometimes leaving others to attack first, before attacking themselves. Ashen and Cessilia didn't have a moment of rest, and were even struggling to keep up at times. Cessilia feared for Ashen's life more than once. He only received minor injuries, but the strain put on his body was bound to become an issue sooner or later. Even she had to use all of her strength to keep those people at bay, and several times, she grunted loudly. The first body didn't hit the ground until several minutes later, their opponents incredibly tenacious. Moreover, even if the previous fights had been easy, Ashen and Cessilia had already fought dozens of fights against several people before coming here, while those fighters had obviously been waiting here all along. The tiredness was starting to show in their movements, and they had to gather all their strength to keep up. She even stopped listening to the dragon growls that had been informing her of what was going on outside. She could only focus on what was going on here, if she wanted to survive this.

"Cessi!"

Suddenly, a second of distraction and a wrong angle put her in danger. She saw the blade, slicing past her skin, and felt Ashen's large hand pulling her in the opposite direction. Cessilia gasped, shocked herself, and violently landed against the opposite wall. Her reflexes taking over, she got back on her feet, but Ashen was already in front, protecting her while they had been pushed against the wall.

"Sorry," she muttered, mad at herself.

"Don't," he grunted. "...Are you alright?"

Cessilia nodded. She only briefly glanced at her injured arm, deep indeed, but the silver scales were already taking over. She resumed the fight, before it hit her. ...Silver?

She kept fighting, trying hard not to make the same mistake twice and risk putting Ashen in danger, but tried to glance at her arm again. The scales weren't silver, but a dark gray. Had she dreamt it again? It was the second time. Before, when she had injured her palm, she had thought for a second that the little scales in her hand had been of a shiny tone, before realizing it was as ash-dark as before. What was wrong with her? She tried to push those dark thoughts away and resumed the fight, even angrier because of her mistake. Ashen had had to withhold their opponents in her stead for a few seconds, but those could have been fatal to him. In fact, he was already covered in sweat and grunting. Luckily, their armor was doing an amazing job of protecting them every time the enemy managed to hit them; the shiny scales seemed to deflect each blade, the shock barely felt on the skin underneath. Cessilia was surprised at how light they were compared to their defensive power. The weapons weren't getting dull either, and followed each of their movements with incredible precision. Cessilia had never been too fond of swords, but the ones she was holding now might just be the ones to change that. There was clearly a difference in the craft of the Dragon Empire's blacksmiths.

The armor and their weapons might be what kept them going for so long. There was a huge difference between fighters who held perfect weapons and armor for their needs, of an incredibly good craft, and those who held standard ones. It was as if Ashen and Cessilia were fighting with legend-level weaponry, while the Yekara soldiers only held high-value ones. Their enemies' weapons were starting to fail them, giving them a slight advantage. Two men lost their lives shortly after their armor was broken open by Ashen's heavy blade, and Cessilia swung around at record speed to get two more men's weak points, slicing their napes without an ounce of hesitation. She and Ashen were in a perfectly synchronized dance of death, and instead of getting more and more tired, they were getting gradually more dangerous. Cessilia's eyes had transformed into a dark-green reptilian stare, scaring her enemies before coldly killing them. She truly was the War God's daughter, moving around so swiftly while sowing death around her. Ashen's movements were just as beautiful, but much more of a brutal force, like a dragon relentlessly attacking with all fangs out, ripping flesh apart and violently breaking bones. Slowly but surely, they were reducing the numbers of their opponents. Each time a Yekara warrior fell, the remaining

ones felt as if the strength of their enemies doubled. Even for experienced fighters, there was a fine line between amazement and fear. They knew the duo they were fighting weren't ordinary fighters, but they couldn't help but be bewildered by the woman's incredibly precise moves and the King's colossal strength. Even Lord Yebekh was left to watch in awe, mouth open at the two warriors, until he realized it was his men on the ground. "What are you doing? Kill them! You incapable bastards! You call yourselves our best fighters?! You better kill them, or you'll die!"

The weakness of that threat had no effect on his men, who had already been fighting for their lives for the past several minutes. Now that they had been reduced to less than half their original number, they had no time to rest at all. Far from looking overwhelmed and outnumbered, Cessilia and Ashen looked like they were making a point of keeping their opponents from catching any break at all.

Suddenly, another loud growl resonated, but much closer this time, sounding like it was coming from all around them.

Even worse, the tower they were in brutally shook, as if an earthquake was coming from above. The fight stopped, all fighters looking up with a common reaction. Cessilia's heart went cold. That was Jinn. He had climbed onto that area of the castle. She and Ashen were luckily in the middle of the room, away from the windows, but that wouldn't help them much if that dragon decided to destroy the entire tower...

"That foolish dragon!" shouted Lord Yebekh, glaring at the ceiling. "Get off the tower, you useless bastard of a reptile!"

Cessilia glared at the man. How could he shout at the dragon like that?! No dragon she knew would have let a human insult them like that without biting their head off in retaliation if they understood and nobody stopped them. Yet, Yebekh kept vociferating at Jinn as if it was just a bad runt.

"...What d-did you do to that dragon?" she hissed, glaring past the fighters at their master.

The man scoffed.

"Me? Nothing... As it turns out, its master is nothing but a stupid wench who knows she needs us to survive. Her dragon obeys me now."

Cessilia didn't believe that for a single second. Dragons couldn't simply be given to someone like one would change a pet's owner. Krai was her father's dragon, and although it had come along with her, the Black Dragon couldn't understand her like it would have her father. It wasn't her dragon, it was merely reflecting her father's protective feelings for her. She knew a

part of the reason her father had sent Krai with her wasn't just for her security, but so he would miss his child less; he had already done that countless times with his wife. A dragon didn't completely mirror its owner's feelings, but it could understand them better than anyone. Even if Jinn's owner had died, her brother's love for Jisel couldn't be simply overthrown by a man's orders.

"...You threatened her," hissed Cessilia, angry. "You used Jisel to manipulate her dragon!"

Yebekh laughed.

"Manipulate? This woman is so foolish and yet cunning herself, I would hardly call that manipulation! ...Did I do

anything different than you, Princess? That Black Dragon isn't yours either, is it? Ha!

How ironic, isn't it? For a bastard prince

to have found you, of all people. You're the dragonless Princess, so useless you have to come accompanied by the War God's

Dragon instead of your own! Aren't we both borrowing someone else's dragon?"

"Don't you dare c-compare me to you," she hissed. "I am still a Dragon Master. I am—"

"You're nothing but the most useless of your parents' children!" he shouted. "Of all the prospective brides he could

have sent the King, he sent a dragonless, powerless one! How pathetic, Princess.

Nothing you own isn't inherited from your

parents, yet you dare to lecture me? I am the Lord of the Yekara Clan, the most powerful Clan Leader of this Kingdom! I fought

and I killed for this position! And soon, I will be the most powerful man in this entire Kingdom!"

"...Dream on," groaned Ashen. "I'm never letting that happen, Yebekh. I'll have your head sliced off your damn neck

and hung on the castle walls before the sun sets!"

"Fierce as ever, King Ashen," laughed Yebekh. "But you are no more deserving than your partner here. You were

nothing but your father's discarded runt, and as expected, you grew up to be a barking mutt!"

Ashen swung his sword left, in a smooth and perfectly controlled movement, pointing at his enemy's throat, although he

was still too many steps away to cut it off.

"Keep talking, Yebekh. I won't be swayed by your words anymore. You're only good at slithering your way into places

of power and then hiding behind someone, aren't you? Let me guess. You were about to do the very same thing with my brother.

He's of no use to you, after all. Once you get rid of me, you could put yourself on the throne, but no. Instead, you'd rather

choose your pawn and hide behind him, then change when it is comfortable for you."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," crowed Yebekh, stepping forward. "Men like you, like your father, are

nothing but pathetic! Figures for the people to watch, but you have no idea about true power, the power to lead men, the power to keep these citizens in control!"

A feminine chuckle stopped his rant. Furious, his eyes went to Cessilia, who had a smile on.

"What are you finding so funny, Princess?!" he shouted.

"You."

He was about to say something, most likely some insult, but Cessilia stepped up first, pushing the tip of her blade

against the nearest soldier's chest, with a glare of warning, having the man cautiously step back.

"You know n-nothing about the citizens of this Kingdom," Cessilia calmly said. "You're right. You are no King. You're no leader, either. You're nothing b-but a vicious snake."

"You—! You wench!"

"...Ashen won't have any p-problem dealing with you," she muttered.

Yebekh's face was gradually becoming deformed by rage, but that only made Ashen happier, a smile appearing on his face.

"You... You're no Princess! You're nothing but a little wench!" he shouted.

"No, you snakeface," grinned Ashen, raising his sword again. "She's a queen. My Queen."

He swung his sword, this time slicing one of Yebekh's remaining men in two. The fight resumed, even fiercer than

before. Even if it only looked like insults had been exchanged, the truth was that both Cessilia and Ashen had been able to

catch a break thanks to that. This was the bit of energy they had needed to fight even harder than before. The remaining fighters

were soon down to five, then only four, then three, all of them growing visibly wary of the unstoppable couple.

Cessilia and Ashen weren't unscathed. Cuts had appeared on the parts of their bodies that weren't covered by the

armor, and they had blood, sweat, and dust covering the previously shiny scales. Their muscles were sore from two days of

relentless fighting, and they had one too many internal injuries already. If anything, they finally seemed human while fighting,

but there was a silent grace to the passion they put into the fight. They didn't seem to swing their weapons so effortlessly, but

their fights were more admirable, given how the pair was working together to get rid of their opponents. In the end, they still

found ways to get the upper hand. Not because they were physically stronger, but because they kept acting like a perfect combo,

trained by the very best, using the best techniques, flawless moves, and sharp senses to best their opponents. And they did.

When the last of Yebekh's men got down on their knees, Ashen made a point of staring right into the Lord's eyes while

mercilessly slicing that last throat. Cessilia was a bit out of breath too, standing next to him with her eyes riveted on the ceiling, listening for more dragon growls. She was standing so close her back was touching his arm, each feeling the other's presence without needing to look.

Yebekh had witnessed the whole fight, yet his eyes still turned red with rage while staring at the bodies layered between the duo and him, as if realizing the truth only now. Ashen swung his sword and got rid of the excess blood.

"...You're next, Yebekh," he hissed.

"Oh, no," chuckled the Lord with a sadistic smile. "Did you forget, my lord? I am not the one competing for the crown."

Shocked, Ashen's eyes turned to the throne, just in time to see his adopted brother jumping toward him, sword first.

Ashen only had the reflex to push Cessilia out of the way, while Rohin's sword violently stabbed his shoulder.

"Ashen!"

Cessilia's scream echoed in the tower like a thunderbolt. They had both made the mistake to completely disregard the one-legged man in the room, as opposed to all the warriors they had fought before. She hadn't even thought that adopted brother of his still had the strength to stand up, let alone to launch an attack. Yet, Ashen's blood did splatter on her face, while she clearly witnessed Rohin's evil grin. That man had put on the prosthesis they had seen before when they weren't watching, and was now very clearly able to stand and face them. He was out of breath, but visibly very proud of the injury he had just caused to Ashen.

"That's it," he said with a rugged voice. "...I told you I'd get back at you, brother."

Cessilia wanted to run to Ashen, but she felt something was wrong before she could put her finger on it. The injury on

Ashen's shoulder was deep and long, but it shouldn't have impaired him. Yet, she clearly saw her lover stagger, and have trouble getting back on his feet. Above them, as if to echo the dramatic situation, Jinn growled again. Its claws appeared at one of the windows, crushing the stone frame. Ashen glanced that way, before his eyes went back to his brother, holding his shoulder.

"...Poison," he hissed.

"Yes, brother," chuckled Rohin. "I know, it's not very fair, but... I needed a little help to make this fight a bit more balanced."

Another scary sound of crumbling stones echoed above them; a portion of the tower made a very worrying sound, making all four of them look up. Jinn growled again, obviously trying to dig its way into a tower half as small as it. After a

second, Yebekh chuckled nervously.

“...I think you’re the one he wants, Princess. That dragon is desperate to kill you, and save his mistress!”

Cessilia barely heard him. Her heart was torn between Ashen’s injury, and the growling dragon outside. Even if it was meant to be against her, she wasn’t insensitive to Jinn’s distress. Dragons were a part of her, after all, and she could tell the young dragon’s despair.

“...Go.”

She turned her head to Ashen, who was gathering his senses, clenching his fists around his sword’s handle.

“Ashen...”

“Go, Cessilia. I got this, and you need to calm that dragon down. I can handle these two bastards, but if this place collapses, we will all be dead for nothing.”

She knew he was right, but she was still reluctant to leave; another growl and stone-breaking sound made the decision

for her, though. She carefully stepped back, getting behind Ashen, her eyes watching the crumbled window already. If she could

get Jinn to follow her, Ashen and this room would be safe, but she didn’t want to abandon him to face his adopted brother and

Lord Yebekh alone, after he had been poisoned...

“Just go,” he insisted calmly. “I trust you... I love you.”

Cessilia’s heart dropped. His words were exactly what she needed. Yes, they trusted each other, and they could rely on

the other. They were no longer once-strangers. She clenched her fists, and quickly, stepped up to him, putting a quick kiss on

his shoulder before running to the door behind them.

“...I trust you too,” she muttered, before running out of the room.

She had one objective in mind: find Jisel to stop Jinn. Or at least draw the dragon as far away as possible from the

throne room it was about to destroy. Cessilia tried to remember the castle’s complex map. She had to be somewhere she could

catch Jinn’s attention, big enough for it not to crumble right away. She suddenly remembered. The room of the first banquet was

on the same level. Cessilia ran, staying close to the windows. She was trying to catch sight or hear another dragon’s growl, but

the ruckus outside was just too much to hear anything else. Jinn was still perilously climbing and growling, as it didn’t look

like the dragon had noticed her leaving that room.

Finally, Cessilia reached the large, oval banquet hall and ran to the balcony where she could see the dragon on the

nearby roof. She whistled, as loud as she could, finally getting Jinn’s attention. The Red Dragon turned its head to her, looking

confused, while Cessilia carefully retreated, ready. It didn’t take more than a few seconds for Jinn to react and, in two jumps it

landed on the roof above her, while Cessilia ran back inside.

"...Are you done playing with my dragon?" suddenly said a calm voice.

Cessilia turned around, just in time to see Jisel closing the large doors behind her, with a slight close-lipped smile.

"Jisel," groaned Cessilia.

"Yeah," she answered. "...See, Princess, perhaps you should have killed me after all."

"I gave you a ch-chance to g-go," said Cessilia.

"I know," sighed Jisel. "...Sadly, that's not much of a choice for me."

Cessilia frowned. That woman was an enigma to her. A part of her acknowledged how similar they were, yet so

different too. Both with dragons that weren't theirs, trying to find a place for their broken identities. Both carrying the dragon blood, without having their own dragon...

The red-haired woman slowly walked up to the balcony, opposite to Cessilia, where Jinn jumped to meet her. The

dragon growled softly, a kind of growl Cessilia knew all too well, that showed affection to its favorite human. Jisel turned her

back to the young dragon, but Jinn growled again, and gently nudged her shoulder with its snout. She sighed, and finally raised

a hand to pet the red scales. The dragon growled again in appreciation, rubbing against her hand and closing its eyes.

"Why d-didn't you run?" Cessilia asked, confused. "My b-brother saved you once, but you chose t-to ally yourself with the Yekara. Again."

"Where would I run to?" Jisel scoffed. "You're mistaken, Princess. You think I'm free, but this whole continent is my

prison. There is no place for a woman like me. Both the Dragon Empire and the Eastern Kingdom will not let a woman with a

roaming dragon live in peace. What is the point of leaving now that they know about Jinn? It's all a matter of time before I'm

caught and used again. No... I'm sick of being manipulated."

She turned to the dragon, faintly smiling at it. Once again, Cessilia noticed Jisel actually held some feelings for the

young dragon. Perhaps it wasn't as strong as its real owner, but she did like the dragon, and sincerely felt connected to it. Jinn

was even more obvious, mirroring what its deceased owner's feelings should have been, those of a brother toward a beloved

older sister. Cessilia's younger siblings' dragons acted the very same with her, always asking for cuddles even if their young

masters pretend otherwise. Dragons were often more in tune with their owners' deep feelings than the superficial ones that

wouldn't last. Jinn was carrying its previous master's inner feelings all the same.

"I did consider fleeing," she said, "but I decided a long time ago that the Eastern Kingdom would be my final home..."

Do you have any idea what it's like, Princess, when you have no home at all? My father used my mother, and then he used me.

My own mother used my little brother to get more of my despicable father's attention. I bet you grew up witnessing nothing but love and care from your own family, but all I got from mine were shackles, betrayal, and poisonous feelings."

She sighed, and turned her eyes back to Cessilia.

"...We're both princesses, after all, aren't we? We have the same grandfather... Sadly, my mother was just one of many,

many disposable princesses. First, she was used, abused by her brother, and then... she fell in love with another monster. Not

all princesses get their happy ending with a prince, Princess Cessilia. My life has been nothing but running away... I lived in

the dark corners of a gigantic palace, like a rat. I hid from every adult that should have protected me. When we fled that Palace,

and I thought I'd finally get some room to breathe, things got even worse... Neither my brother's birth or Jinn's appearance

were the ray of hope I should have had. They made my parents crazier instead. Yet, my younger brother got attached to me, the

only other person capable of actually caring for him without twisted feelings... but

instead of being twisted, my feelings were

nonexistent. Numb. I was in constant survival mode ever since I was born. How could it have been any different?"

She flicked her red hair over her shoulder and began moving around the room, walking next to the walls facing

Cessilia. Meanwhile, Cessilia was getting ready to fight. She didn't think Jisel would have trapped her here if it wasn't to end

things... It didn't seem like she had any weapon but a small dagger in her right hand, though, which was clearly not enough.

"I fled... I lied, I stole. I sold myself too. I did literally anything a woman could do to survive. I mixed myself up with

people I thought I belonged with, but then again, my lineage kept coming back like a curse. I wear it on my skin, after all. Plus,

hiding a dragon isn't all that easy."

She chuckled, seemingly admiring some invisible detail in the wall.

"You c-could have lived freely b-by yourself," said Cessilia, "with Jinn t-to protect you.

No one should have been able to hurt you..."

Jisel suddenly turned to her with angry eyes.

"Oh, but that's where we're different, Princess. Unlike you, I'm not one to hide behind a dragon. I don't rely on Jinn,

like I have never relied on anybody but myself. Look at you. You might be the War God's daughter, but you're nothing but a

coward!"

"D-don't--"

"What?" scoffed Jisel. "Aren't I telling the truth? You were born with everything. Parents who loved you. Caring

siblings, and even your own dragon! And what did you do? ...You betrayed every single one of them. You were dumb enough to lose your dragon and to leave your family for a man!"

"You d-don't know anything about me!"

"Of course I know," she retorted, a vicious smile on her lips. "It's written all over you. I've been watching you, curious about what kind of woman Ashen was so madly in love with. But what a disappointment! ...You're afraid of your own shadow, Princess. I'm sick of you and your sick manner of always acting so fragile. Even that stupid stutter of yours. You're not just scared, you're someone eaten up by guilt. I can see the pieces fitting together. You lost your dragon for a man, and you lost your family's trust. Isn't it ironic? You lost pretty much the only part of you that made you oh so special, and now, you're so afraid of showing what a disappointment you are to everyone, that you act like this!"

"Shut up!"

Cessilia violently punched the column next to her, furious. Even Jisel stopped her pacing, surprised, and looked up at the marble that trembled. The spot where the Princess' fist had hit the stone was literally dug in by a couple of inches, and the whole structure was echoing a worrisome creaking. After a second, Jisel seemed to regain control of herself again, with a faint chuckle.

"...Look at that. I'm right, aren't I? You know you're not worthy of what you have. Your own brothers had to come and rescue you from the mess you can't clean up by yourself. Your mere presence in this Kingdom ruined it! Ashen would have been fine if you hadn't come. I would have been perfectly fine, by his side! ...You know, I truly believed it, for a while. I was fine with being a mere mistress. I was fine with being called his whore, the King's slut, as long as I could live safely, peacefully. But no. You had to come here, and once again, ruin everything I was entitled to."

Suddenly, Jisel also punched the wall next to her. The impact wasn't big enough to cause as much damage as Cessilia's fist had, but it did leave a monstrous hole in the previously perfect marble, and make more of the wall creak. A few steps back behind her, Jinn growled angrily at Cessilia, all fangs out. The dragon was now trying to get more of its head into the room, although the window was obviously too small.

"...I would have been fine staying in the shadows," bitterly muttered Jisel. "Once again. Hiding in the shadows of this castle... It's not like I hadn't done it before. Except, this one, there would be no father or uncle to chase me. I could have simply been here, quiet and patient. I thought I could be happy, just this one time. ...However, things aren't that easy, in a man's

world.”

She scoffed.

“He had to prove his stupid, childish love to you, once again. You know, I didn’t love him, but I did hope he wouldn’t

abandon me like most had. I thought I had found a broken, but righteous man...

However, a mistress is nothing but an eyesore

when the real lady comes, isn’t she? He had to get rid of me.”

“He let you g-go,” said Cessilia. “You could have g-gone anywhere! The continent is so vast!”

“I did not want to go anywhere!” shouted Jisel. “I wanted to make this place my home!

Do you have any idea what it’s

like, to have to flee, over and over again? How many times will I have to depend on a man’s good will to survive?!”

“You d-don’t need a man!” Cessilia shouted back. “You have a d-dragon, and you’re such a smart woman b-by

yourself! You made it this far alone! You c-could settle anywhere you want and start over!”

“...Is that what you think? That I made it this far alone? I relied my whole life on a man’s good will, Princess Cessilia.

My father, my uncle, all those I slept with, in exchange for food, shelter, or safety. Do you think a woman alone can ever make

it on her own, without being bothered by a man? True, I have a dragon. But once men become aware of Jinn, what do you think

will happen to him? He’ll be hunted and killed, or used. Don’t you know best? You were a girl with a dragon, and you left your

father’s home once... What happened to your dragon then?”

Cessilia’s blood went cold. Cece. Her beloved Cece was killed.

Jisel’s words brought back the haunting memory of that night. The men’s horrible voices, smell, touch. Just

remembering any of that nightmare made her stomach twist and want to puke her guts out. It was the most terrifying night of her

life. She wasn’t much like a dragon at all, back then. Just a vulnerable girl, with fear paralyzing her and pinning her down. She

hated it. She hated that she had been so powerless, when she had wielded a sword for the first time at six, and learned to fight

long before that. Yet, there were no words for the horrible, paralyzing fear that had overtaken her back then.

“That’s right,” said Jisel. “...That’s the look. When we hate both the gender we were born in, and the stronger sex...

See, Princess? I told you we were more similar than you think. We both know what it’s like... to have your life in somebody

else’s hands. We live in a man’s world. Having a dragon, or being a princess, doesn’t change a thing. Don’t tell me again that I

do not need a man! Or live by your words, and leave Ashen and this Kingdom!”

Cessilia clenched her fists.

“I c-can’t,” she muttered.

"Why not? Are you going to tell me about something as foolish as love, perhaps? Don't bother, then. Keep living in your fairytale, Princess. But this one won't have a good ending."

She suddenly reached one of the tables in the banquet hall, and pulled out a medium-length sword from underneath it.

Cessilia frowned. Had that been hidden here all along? Or did Jisel put it there? The red-haired woman swung the sword easily, as if she was familiar with it.

"Surprised?" chuckled Jisel. "I needed a place to hide it quickly after killing that idiot Pangoja girl."

It suddenly hit Cessilia. The murder at the banquet! Jisel had vouched for her being on the balcony with the King during the murder, but she had no alibi herself, aside from her brief appearance during their interaction. So she really was the one behind Vena's brutal murder. Cessilia couldn't even say it came as much of a shock. She had her suspicions from the beginning...

"You were working f-for the Yekara all along?"

"Not that long. But when I heard about the competition and you arrived, Lord Yebekh was smart enough to offer me a deal... If one of his candidates got the throne, he would happily offer me a mansion to live in comfortably, as long as I got out of the picture. At first, I had no intention to betray Ashen, but when you appeared... I did try to extend a hand to you, but sadly, you refused, and the choice was quickly made. I knew Ashen marrying you would have a very different outcome than him marrying any other candidate. He didn't care for them, but I knew he'd get rid of me if he was worried about what you'd say... and I was right, once again."

"The Yekara t-ried to use you all along, Jisel. They were never g-going to let you live!"

"I know that too," chuckled Jisel, "but I also had my own hidden card."

Jinn growled in response, trying to chew a bit more of the window's frame. For now, it was too small for the dragon's head to come in, but at this rate, Jinn would surely break enough of it to actually get in... The two women finally stepped closer to each other. Cessilia held on to her weapons a bit tighter, trying to evaluate the situation. She had never seen Jisel actually fight, but from the amount of strength displayed earlier, she definitely had inherited the Dragon Blood too. Not only that, but the way she moved her sword showed she had received decent training. How? During her years fleeing the Empire? She couldn't tell. Either way, she was not expecting that woman to fight fairly. Jisel wasn't even glancing at her dragon trying to break into the room and wrecking the balcony, meaning she expected Jinn to step into the game at any time. The worst part of all was that Cessilia couldn't feel any real hatred coming from that woman. It was even scarier

than if she had really intended to kill her. This was like Vena's murder: brutal and cold-blooded. A faint smile even appeared on Jisel's lips as they got closer.

"It feels like it was all bound to come to this, right?" she muttered. "You and I. Two women fighting for a man.... no, because of a man. I'm not that interested in the King anymore. He's about to die, and the Yekara will marry their daughter to his adopted brother before getting rid of him too. Such a simple plan, but then again, this Kingdom is already on its knees."

"You d-don't know a thing about this Kingdom," said Cessilia, lifting her weapons.

"And you do?" Jisel mocked.

Without waiting, Cessilia jumped forward, launching the first strike. Surprised, Jisel frowned and lifted her two blades

just in time to block her. The two women's blades loudly clashed, and for a few seconds, they measured each other's strength,

trying to push the other's defense, their faces only inches away from each other. Their styles were somewhat similar, using the

flow of their movements, rather than brute force, and trying to outmaneuver their opponent. For a while, it was as if a red fire

and a purple-scaled creature were dancing around each other, trying to burn or bite the other, looking for a weakness. They

never split up for more than a couple of seconds, before throwing themselves at each other again. Their style was superb,

flawless, and fierce. It was nothing like the rugged fights from before, or between men using only their brute strength. Each

woman was using her best skill, her wits, and showing off impressive fighting choreography. Jisel was dancing with her two

mismatched blades as if they had been extensions of herself, while Cessilia balanced herself perfectly with her identical

weapons. Despite the difference in their respective styles, the flow of their movements was sharp and swift, looking for the

smallest window to attack, using speed and reflexes to try and best the other. Neither of them were showing any mistakes,

always in motion, their light steps never touching the floor for more than a second. Their dance was like a death ritual, with the

thunder and dragon's furious growls as background percussion. Pearls of sweat appeared on their skin, as each woman was

getting frustrated with the other.

After a while, they broke apart, by just a few steps, catching a quick break. The two women were now circling around

each other like two furious wolves ready to bite one another.

"You sh-should have left, Jisel," muttered Cessilia.

"You already said that, Princess. But you know what? I think the same of you. You don't belong here. You're a coward.

And without your dragon, well, you're nothing."

The furious Princess thrust her swords at her again, and Jisel blocked it with a smile on her lips. They began fighting for real, their four blades hitting each other for a few minutes, the metallic clashes echoing throughout the banquet hall. Their fight was violent, cold, and merciless. Both of them were glaring at one another, looking for the next place to viciously hit and try to hurt the other. The more hits their weapons exchanged, the more Cessilia felt her blood boiling. Jisel's repeated smirks were annoying her, as if that woman always mocked her. She tried to keep fighting and remain focused, but it was too late, the venom from Jisel's words were slowly poisoning her mind. She kept thinking about what she had said, and about Cece. Was she right? Probably. At least, when it came to her being a coward. Cessilia felt the same. She had felt that for a long time now, but the more she tried to push that thought away, the more vivid it came to her mind. Saying she was afraid of her own shadow wasn't a lie either. It was just as Kassian had said... she was scared of looking back at the Cessilia from before. She couldn't even remember what kind of girl she was before she had lost Cece. All she could think of, whenever she tried, was the painful result of her mistake. The guilt that was choking her up and tightening its claws around her voice all the time. Was it really love that had brought her back to Ashen, or the need to prove she was right to do what she had done for that love of theirs? It was suffocating just to think about it. Jisel was right. Her own anger, sadness, and remorse had been slowly building up inside, in all those words she had never dared to say. She resented herself for the weakness she had shown back then when her dragon needed her. Even more today. "You don't deserve a... dragon," grunted Jisel, as their weapons clashed again. "That's right. You're too weak! Too much of a coward!" She suddenly managed to graze Cessilia's arm. Not a deep wound, but the sharp edge of her blade suddenly sliced the skin that was showing between the parts of Cessilia's armor, leaving a vivid red line. Far from being bothered by the pain, Cessilia suddenly swung beautifully, and sent a violent flying kick toward her opponent, throwing Jisel far across the room. It wasn't enough to injure her, though, as the redhead fell back on her feet, a victorious smile on her lips. "Ha! See! The precious daughter of the God of War is nothing but..." She stopped herself upon seeing Cessilia's eyes. The Princess was now standing completely still, suddenly looking different, almost taller. Her eyes were shining with a dangerous, vivid green fire in them, as if lit up by some inner flame.

Cessilia stepped forward, and despite the distance between them, Jisel stepped back, scared. Something felt off, as if she was suddenly faced with a completely different person. Someone that was not human.

"...You were right," she said with a strangely calm, almost mesmerizing voice. "I am done being a coward. ...I am done being sorry and afraid."

She looked down, frowning.

"There is some truth in what you said. I was always... dependent on Ashen's love. Not because I didn't truly love him, but because I could hide behind that to excuse what had happened to Cece."

Cessilia's heart ached painfully at the mention of her deceased dragon. Yet, she took a deep breath in. She'd had enough of resisting this pain. She didn't even try to hold back her tears.

"...It was all my fault," she muttered. "Although my family was there to tell me it wasn't... Not because I went out. Not because I was captured while trying to reunite with Ashen. What those men did... none of that was my fault, that much is true.

Whatever they were seeking, their misdeeds are their fault only. And they paid with their lives for it. The one thing I can never forgive myself for is... that fear."

Cessilia closed her eyes. She was done pushing that memory to the back of her mind, silencing it like her own voice had been silenced for so long. She didn't care anymore. No, she wasn't going to allow herself to flee from it any longer.

"You said it," she continued. "I was... paralyzed by fear. I was so terrified of what they'd do to me, of the pain I had already endured, that I couldn't react, even when they did that horrible thing to my dragon."

She lifted her fingers, touching the scars on her neck.

"For a long time, I couldn't even bear to see these. I couldn't bear the memory of that pain. I felt like they were still hurting like the first second their blades had opened my throat. I'd wake up in horror at night, terrorized. My mother had to drug me, just so I could endure it... but it wasn't the pain that really hurt me. It was to relive the fear, and the pain in Cece's eyes, over and over again. My dragon didn't die for me. She died because of me. Because I was too paralyzed by fear to fight back."

Cessilia suddenly reopened her eyes, once again burning with a green, scary flame inside. Jisel could feel something was completely different about her. It was as if she was facing an entirely different woman. Even her posture was straighter, taller, looking like her real height. When the Princess resumed walking toward her, she backed off again, realizing she only had a few steps left between the wall behind and herself. Right now, her whole body was screaming to get out of there, to put as

many walls as possible between her and that woman's green eyes...

"And you know what? The worst part is that I am still afraid to fight back. I've been afraid for so long, because I've

seen the monster in those men's eyes. And I knew that if I let go, even just one bit, of my fear, the anger I was building up inside would eat me up, and make me a monster too."

She did have the eyes of a monster right then. The eyes of a furious dragon, stuck on her prey with a murderous, terrifying intent. Jisel kept backing away, raising her blades in a protective stance, but Cessilia's cold and composed approach was just paralyzing her with fear. She felt like she had unleashed something in that woman, and would only regret it once she got over there much too soon.

"You... You're just thinking this is because of Ashen?" said Jisel, in an attempt to say something, anything to save

herself. "You think his love has made you stronger?!"

"This has nothing to do with my love for Ashen."

Suddenly, she was there, and her attack came from the sky, only leaving Jisel half a second to put her blades up. It was the same amount of strength as before, so why was she so scared? She could keep up with that woman, she had the strength to measure up to her... So why did she feel like Cessilia had grown into an absolute beast in just a matter of seconds?!

Their blades clashed, and Jisel rolled to the side, cautiously using the opportunity to put some more distance between

them. Still, Cessilia's eyes wouldn't leave her alone as the Princess followed her every single step.

"You know nothing about what love is supposed to be, Jisel. You only ever saw him as your way to survive. You used him."

"So what? You're no better than I am! You only hid behind him like a coward!"

"No," Cessilia retorted. "...Do you know why I love Ashen so much? ...He's not as special as you, or everyone else, is

trying to push him to be. He was never meant to be a king's son. He's just a man, like any other out there. He's not a great king,

and he's full of flaws too. His bad temper, his stubbornness. He's made tons of mistakes, and I know it all too well. He can't

even trust people close to him... and that's all why I love him even more. He's imperfect, and he's broken... just like me. But, at

least Ashen's true to his feelings; he gets mad when he's mad, and he never fears his own voice. He doesn't flee from his

responsibilities, and he knows how to bear the blame for his own mistakes and flaws. While... While all I did, for all these

years, was push my own responsibilities to the back of my mind and act like a victim."

At the opposite window, Jinn kept growling furiously, almost covering Cessilia's voice with the ruckus. The dragon's

red-scaled paws were slowly digging their way inside the room, weakening the whole structure of the tower the banquet hall belonged to. The walls around and above the windows Jinn was destroying were starting to creak dangerously, thin dust coming off as a warning of a potential collapse. Still, neither of the two women bothered to try and stop the dragon from smashing its way into the room.

Jisel was actually hoping her dragon would get there soon to help her, while Cessilia couldn't be bothered. No one could tell if she was even hearing the dragon coming in behind her, the thunder above their heads, and the ruckus coming from the streets.

"...But I'm done," she said. "You were right, Jisel. I'm done being a coward."

They swung their swords at each other again. The two women resumed their battle, fiercer, faster, more violent than before. It was down to who would be able to kill the other first. They weren't leaving any time for rest, every second was passed trying to pierce the other's defenses. It was a continuous ballet of blades, blocking or attacking relentlessly. They were flying and dancing around the banquet hall as if it had been just the right size to contain their attacks, as pieces of furniture were regularly stabbed and sliced in their stead, or violently thrown across the room to make way. The strength of their attacks was no less than that of a battle between male warriors. Those two had the Dragon Blood flowing fiercely through their veins, fueling the adrenaline and making them as aggressive as dragons ferociously defending their territory. There was no territory to defend, only the burning desire to best the other woman and get rid of their opponent. "It doesn't change a thing," muttered Jisel as soon as Cessilia gave her a second to catch her breath. "Once a coward, always a coward, Princess. Don't think you can change just because you're a bit mad now."

"Oh, I'm beyond mad," hissed Cessilia, "and I won't allow myself to be a coward anymore!"

She furiously struck again, Jisel's sword barely appearing in time to block her attack. Yet, she wasn't done, and not leaving her opponent any chance. Cessilia immediately spun around, and struck again, aiming at her flank this time; Jisel stopped it again, but too late. She was thrown violently to the side, forced to drop her dagger as her flank brutally hitting the ground.

"You know, for a while, I even feared that my dragon would actually come back," said Cessilia, "because I wouldn't know how to face her. I was that afraid of facing my own mistake that deep down, I really thought she was better off dead than with an owner like me!"

She struck as Jisel was still on the ground, leaving her to raise her sword above her body to protect herself. It didn't matter how Jisel held her sword up; Cessilia relentlessly attacked, again and again. However, behind all her reckless stabbing, tears began to appear. She wasn't trying to kill her opponent; her reckless attacks endlessly hit the blade of Jisel's sword, putting enormous pressure on the redhead, but without actually targeting her for real underneath her sword. No, instead, Cessilia was putting all of her rage into every single strike. Her arms were swinging with furious strength, like she could have kept punching a wall in anger. Those tears were coming from her inner rage, bottled up all these years, more than the hatred she felt for Jisel.

She was mad, furious at herself. She had tried to be good, to only allow herself to hide in the fear of that memory, while keeping the anger away. She had been so scared of letting that anger come out, scared of what she would have been capable of, if she had let her fury come out that day. Cessilia could almost remember the bitter disappointment in her heart when she had heard her brothers and father had already killed those men. And one second later, she had been shocked with the thoughts that had come to her mind, of what she would have been capable of doing to them herself if she had grasped her chance for revenge... It had been a constant trap. Fear, anger, fear of herself again. Fear of becoming the same kind of monster she had seen in those monsters' eyes. Cessilia had always admired her mother, and she wanted to be kind, gentle, like her. But she had her father's strength, and the blood of a dragon running through her veins. Her mother wasn't capable of killing people twice her size, but she was. And right now, she felt like she had finally reached that point, where the dragon inside could finally be free, after being trapped for so long and for all the wrong reasons. She suddenly stopped striking and took a step back, catching her breath, and wiping her tears.

"See, Jisel. I'm done being a coward like you. Hiding behind a man or my cousin. Behind a dragon... behind any excuse. I am done passing for the one that needs protection. I am no weak, hurt child anymore!"

Just as she shouted that, the wall behind them violently burst open. With a terrifying roar, Jinn crawled into the room, the large red head immediately going for Cessilia. The Princess only had time to turn around and raise her swords before she was brutally thrown across the room. A hilt escaped her fingers, and her back violently hit the opposite wall, her whole body shaking inside the armor. Even as she fell down, Cessilia had to

immediately curl and try to protect herself from the stones crumbling above her. It was like a landslide, trying to bury her alive. She heard Jisel scream and shout something to her dragon, but it was barely heard through the ruckus. Cessilia quickly dug herself out with painful grunts, before Jinn's claws cut through the mountain covering her. The young dragon wasn't just trying to kill her; it was wrecking the whole place! Luckily, the mass destruction going on allowed Cessilia to get away on all fours, while Jinn couldn't see or smell her through the mess of crumbling stones and clouds of dust filling the air. Cessilia quickly found a spot under a table to hide briefly, and catch her breath while witnessing the havoc in the room. Half of the tower's wall had been busted open, along with the roof above, leaving it exposed to the raging storm outside. In fact, Cessilia had been thrown against the edge of the half still standing, away from the only door and stairs out of there. Jisel was back on her feet, in the middle of the room, vociferating like a mad woman.

"Kill her! Kill her! She's there!"

Cessilia grimaced, and rolled out of her hideout before the dragon wrecked it too. She jumped back on her feet, glad the armor had held. She was bruised and injured from the shock for sure, but thankfully, the armor fitted her perfectly and had done its job protecting her, for the most part. Cessilia raised her sword, glad she had only lost one of the two despite the sudden hit.

Fighting a dragon was a lot different from fighting a woman, and she was going to need that dragon claw sword!

Jinn was as ruthless and reckless as any young dragon; furiously growling, it kept trying to bite or scratch her, not bothering with the fact that it was completely destroying the room and even throwing its own mistress off. Only when Jinn heard Jisel scream did the dragon look back at her, worried, before she shouted at it to attack again. Blocking its attacks was a whole new story from blocking Jisel's. Cessilia had to wield her sword in a defense position so its fangs wouldn't get to any or her limbs, and even a dragon's claw couldn't pierce a dragon's skin so easily, but it was close every time. Jinn would try to pounce on her, throw her against the ground or a wall, and wreak havoc until something crumbled or collapsed and forced it to back off. Twice, Cessilia managed to slice the dragon's snout, making it twice as enraged.

While she was able to keep the dragon from injuring her in some way, the same couldn't be said for their battleground.

The banquet hall was already in ruins, unrecognizable except for the entrance door, still miraculously standing. Almost all the

walls had been blown out, the ceiling collapsed, the stones falling on them or to the sides, hitting the other parts of the castle or diving into the sea. Cessilia's face was covered in sweat and rainwater, the dragon's growl echoing with the thunderous storm around them. The ground was getting both unstable and slippery, threatening to collapse at any given moment. Suddenly, a stone slipping under her threw Cessilia completely off balance. She fell to her side, allowing the dragon's paw to completely sweep her out of the way. The sharp claws dug deep into her flesh, making Cessilia let out a scream of pain. She felt her whole body echo the horrible pain of her injury. Her flank was throbbing, the horrible feeling of foreign, painful darts stabbing her shoulder, flank, and stomach, piercing the pieces of her armor. Cessilia swung her sword blindly, and by chance, she hit something that made the dragon growl in fury. She was swept once again, her body sliding down the floor until she hit something, perhaps another piece of the fallen wall; the pain was still veiling everything in an intense red. She hadn't realized her head was hurt too until a thin trail of blood ran down her temple and eyelashes. Her hand went immediately for the injury by instinct to try and stop the bleeding. The warm liquid quickly filled her hand.

"Ha! See? ...You're still nothing without your dragon, Princess!"

Cessilia raised her head, and between her chestnut curls, she spotted Jisel, facing her next to her dragon, a triumphant smile on her lips.

"You're still as weak as ever! You've lost the privileges of your blood! Your dragon wouldn't even want to come back to such a weak mistress! You're nothing but a..."

She stopped talking as Cessilia moved. The Princess was slowly getting back on her feet, despite the pain and blood running down her left side. Not only that, but the blood flow had calmed down a lot. Cessilia began taking off the damaged pieces of armor with her valid hand. The heavy pieces fell loudly on the floor, one by one, while Jisel watched in confusion.

With no more armor to protect them, Cessilia's injuries should have been exposed and yet, there was none of that. Instead, her body was shining. A thunderbolt struck from the sky above them, revealing the large, beautiful waves of scales that were appearing on her skin. The blood of her injuries was already drying out, and slowly replaced by the outgrowth of magnificent, silvery, diamond-shaped dragon scales on her skin. They had a beautiful magenta shine every time the light hit them, making them look even more vivid than her previous armor. Every single injury Cessilia had received was now getting covered by the

growing scales, as if a second skin was growing on her in patches, like a predator's markings. Her own skin could still be seen underneath in a strange contrast, but the new silvery scales were covering even a portion of her face. She didn't look human anymore, but like a half-dragon creature, with glowing green eyes and a shimmery skin. "No..." muttered Jisel, panicked, stepping back, her eyes wide open in horror. "What is this...? No. No, no, no, no, no! J-Jinn! Jinn, kill her! Kill her!" "...You should have tried that sooner." Jinn growled furiously, and while its mistress ran to the back, the dragon arched its body, making itself bigger and showing its fangs, ready to face her again. This time, Cessilia was ready. Her injuries were still painful, but she could feel it. The Dragon Blood, hot and burning through her veins, rushing through her whole body and supplying her with the adrenaline she needed to resume the fight. She had never felt so strong before, so... like a dragon. She was ready. With a fierce look in her green eyes, she began running, lifted her sword, and jumped at the Red Dragon, blade first.

Chapter 27

"What the heck is going on up there?!" Tessandra raised her eyes, trying to see through the dust, the rain, and the blinding lightning bolts that shook the already dark skies above. For a while now, they had been hearing a terrible ruckus continuously coming from the castle, and from what she could see, most of it was that annoying Red Dragon's doing. The red silhouette could easily be spotted on the higher towers, climbing up them like an oversized snake, its growls regularly reaching them. She grunted and swung her sword to get rid of a couple of soldiers that were coming at them. Back to back with Sabael, they were still acting like an unstoppable duo. Luckily, he was still in a good enough shape to keep fighting and defend his position without too much trouble. "If my memory's right, that stupid teenage dragon just blew open the banquet hall! ...At least we know where the King and Cessi are!" she shouted back to him. "Will they be able to handle that?" asked Sabael behind her, still looking worried. Tessandra scoffed, and got rid of the blood on her sword. "This isn't Cessi's first time dealing with a dragon," she said. "As long as she and the King stay together, it should be fine." "Wasn't His Majesty injured?!" "That's what I said, she'll cover his ass!" Although she was hoping that was the case, they had no way of finding out how things were going in the castle; the entire way to the gates was blocked by countless fights. The streets were crowded with both citizens and Yekara fighters or

mercenaries. It was easy to see which side each was on; while the Yekara and their allies were fighting with proper weapons and sharp skills, the townspeople were literally handling pitchforks, kitchen knives... actually, anything that could stab, cut, or knock out someone.

Tessandra avoided another swinging shovel when she moved to the streets, trying to find a spot where she could observe their surroundings more clearly. They had lost sight of the Cheshi allies, but they could see them appearing from time to time to help the citizens take out the Yekara. This was one of the messiest battlefields she had ever been on, but at the very least, she was almost sure they had the upper hand. Despite their lack of skill, the citizens that had gathered were just too big in numbers for the Yekara to properly fight. Every time they tried to face someone, three more citizens would come from behind to knock them out or hinder them in some way. Tessandra had even had her own one-on-one fights taken over this way, and now, she was just fine swinging her sword and trying to make her way out the best she could without injuring innocents. It also meant there weren't any killings on either side, as the Yekara barely got to do any damage, and the citizens were more focused on defending themselves too. They were even somewhat serving the fighters to her, one by one, or to anyone with fighting skills, so either the Cheshi, the Royal Guards still on their side, or Tessandra herself would give the finishing blow. Still, this wouldn't be enough. She had to know what was going on throughout the Capital. With Sabaël following tightly behind, she did her best to break away from the fights and climb up a roof to check out the situation. The fighting had mostly overtaken the handful of large places in the Capital that had the space for it; all the other streets were mostly deserted, except for people running from one place to another, or attempting to flee the surrounding chaos. She glanced toward the sea shore; Naptunie had lit the last fire a while ago, and there was nothing else to add. She could spot the dragons easily defending each one of their bridges, and happily getting rid of all the mercenaries and Yekara people trying to cross them; it looked like both dragons were having a lot of fun and absolutely no trouble at all. She wasn't worried for Darsan either. He was probably having tons of fun on his bridge with plenty of people to brawl against. No, Tessandra was more concerned about Kassian and that woman, Bastat. They were in the middle of the largest battlefield, the edge of the island that was the Capital, trying to organize the chaotic troops however they could to minimize the losses.

"How bad is it?" asked Sabaël, as she came down. "Did you see my sister?"

"Nope, no trace of Nana, but that's for the better... This is the most chaotic battle I've ever seen, Sab. The citizens are trying to defend their homes, but not all the fights are evolving. We can't simply kill all those bastards one after another, it's going to take ages, and I want to get to the castle!"

"Same," he sighed. "I don't feel too good about leaving the Princess and His Majesty on their own when the Yekara have taken control of the place. ...Can't we get one of the dragons there?"

"If we do, we will leave one more bridge unattended, and from what I've seen, I would not recommend that! Plus, you've seen their sizes! Even just Kian would literally wreck any street he steps in!"

"So what do we do?" sighed Sabael, glancing around at the chaos surrounding them.

"We need to stop the fights here and get to the castle! I am not fond of the Yekara, but I can't help but believe we need to capture them, not kill them! Not only them, but all the Royal Guards too!"

"And those mercenaries," muttered Tessandra.

She was thinking along those lines. As much as she loved a good fight, this Kingdom was already on its knees long before this. The streets were full of citizens, and each family was doing their own thing to survive. Tessandra couldn't help but remember her cousin's concern, even toward those mercenaries. She would hate to see that much blood shed. There had to be a way it could be stopped.

"...Sab, those people are sticking to their spots, right? They probably got orders before the fight."

"Yeah, the Yekara have always been military. They stick to their orders until death if they need to. Between us Royal Guards, we always joke that they need their superior's brain to think for them..."

"So if we found a way to have them stop fighting or make them believe they don't have a reason to fight anymore, it could work, right? What would make them move?"

Sabael frowned and raised his sword to counter another attack coming from a soldier. As soon as they had gotten to the end of the building, they found themselves stuck in the crowd again, surrounded by shouts and strikes coming from all directions. At this rate, it would be hard to even regain control of the crowd, they were risking a mass riot...

"Let's force them to move," he suddenly said.

"What? How?"

"Their main residence! The Yekara Clan's residence has been guarded like a fortress forever. That's where they stock everything, including their weapons, and they've never opened it. I heard some of their people enrolled in the Royal Guard talking before, it's like a whole military camp in there!"

"...So if we get in trouble over there, you think they'll run to save their home?"

"Worth a shot."

Tessandra frowned. It was a bit unethical, but from where she stood, she couldn't really say they'd be the worst of the two. In fact, some other houses had been raided before, and for the entirety of the previous night, the other citizens had been subjected to forced searches and violent threats. The more she thought about Sabael's idea, the more she felt like it sounded right. All those soldiers were there because of their deep loyalty to their clan. If they thought something had happened at their main residence, they'd probably flock there regardless of the orders they got.

"...I like your idea, handsome. Where is it?"

"A few streets away from here, northeast!"

So they would also get closer to Kassian and Bastat's position. Tessandra glanced at the castle. She wished she was

able to help her cousin, but right now, she was probably much more useful on the ground, among the other soldiers... She glared once more at the Red Dragon, climbing up the towers.

"Cessi, don't be too kind, girl. You better not let that bitch get away again..."

"Tessa? Are we going?"

Tessandra nodded and joined Sabael. He ran ahead of her, guiding her through the streets. It was remarkably easy to get away from the crowd they had been with; Tessandra's shiny green armor could be seen from far away, and by now, the locals knew she was on their side. They kept fighting every time they found a Yekara soldier on the way, or a Royal Guard who had betrayed his uniform; Sabael was the maddest at those. As someone incredibly proud of his duty, he was furious at all those who had turned their backs on the King. They had just killed another duo of them when he furiously kicked one of those guys out of the road.

"Hey, easy, love," said Tessandra with a sigh, quickly cleaning the blood off her weapon.

"Sorry, it's just... so many people fight every year to become a Royal Guard! It's one of the most coveted positions in the Kingdom. The pay is good, and many people desperately need that kind of salary. We all had to go through a very tough selection and defy the odds to get there. I trained with these guys. But... when I see how easily those bastards betrayed the Kingdom for even more money, when we are trained to protect it, it makes me mad. Even if a lot were in it for the money, I still thought they were good guys, loyal. For fuck's sake, we're supposed to protect the citizens of this Kingdom! ...Yet I saw guys wearing the same uniform as I do forcing themselves into houses, robbing their neighbors, and... and they spent half the night ransacking the castle and fucking beating us up..."

Tessandra suddenly realized how furious he really was. Unlike her rather vocal self, Sabael was one to keep his emotions to himself and rarely showed what he felt. She had already understood that, but after finally reuniting with him that morning, she hadn't realized how long of a night it had been for him. They had been separated, and after getting beaten up and captured, he had escaped an execution only to be thrown right back into fighting. He hadn't gotten rest, and half of the people who had put him through hell overnight wore the same uniform as him. Well, he had most of his clothes ripped apart, so there was a clear difference, but still... his fists were clenched around his sword's handle and trembling. Because his injuries were mostly alright, it didn't mean Sabael was feeling the same inside. She was a bit annoyed at herself for being so blind. Cessilia was the empathetic one, while she easily missed these kinds of things... She sighed and put her sword aside to walk up to him. Sabael, who had been ready to keep going, was taken aback when she suddenly came up to him, and put her hands on his cheeks.

"Look at me. You've had a long night, Sab," she said softly. "I understand. But you need to focus, and cool down a bit, love. Don't worry, I promise you all those bastards will pay in due time for their betrayal. And once this is all over, your King will make sure the next recruits are truly loyal. I'm sure you're in for a hell of a promotion too."

Tessandra's cool eyes finally got to him. Sabael realized how heavily he was breathing, and gradually calmed down. It

was his first moment to catch a break after all that... He sighed and slowly nodded.

Tessandra smiled and put a quick kiss on his lips, making him chuckle and put a hand on her lower back.

"We got time for this?" he chuckled.

"We got all the time you need," she retorted very seriously. "Sab, I'm hot-headed, but even I know that if you stay that

mad, you're going to make mistakes. I don't even care if we fry those bastards, but I don't want to see you get hurt. You've got enough parts of your body injured already and I am not liking my handsome being damaged. Also, only I am allowed to touch and stitch you up. Got it?"

"Ah, I was worried you were getting soft. Now that's my girl," he smiled.

"Yeah, exactly."

He put another kiss on her lips, making Tessandra smile. Now he seemed much calmer.

"As much as I love this, I'm pretty sure we don't have the time to get any naughtier.

Ready to throw a party at those bastards' residence, dragon style?" she smirked.

"Let's get going."

They resumed running, one behind the other, gradually meeting more hindrances on the way. It was clear the Yekara fighters were pouring out from the main residence, unlike the mercenaries they had paid to assist them. Sabael and Tessandra had to stay together and keep forcing their way to the main residence, sometimes deciding to hide when a larger group appeared on the way.

They took a new turn, and Sabael grabbed her to hide in between two houses when another group passed by without noticing them.

"Heck, how many are there...?" groaned Tessandra.

"More than I thought," admitted Sabael. "My best guess is they got more people that were outside to be in the Capital for this. I'm also pretty sure some of those were definitely not Yekara until recently..."

"So what, they got more people to join the clan?"

"That would be a good way to recruit without being noticed. Many people are desperate for a bigger tribe's protection, and if they had papers as Yekara people, it would have been easy to sneak them inside the Capital too. You recruit people from the desperate neighborhoods outside, promise them food and a roof as long as they promise to fight for your clan's sake. I bet many would be willing to agree to that rather than keep struggling outside the Outer Wall..."

"Cessi was right," sighed Tessandra. "This Kingdom really needs a lot of changes..."

"I'm sure she and the King will get to that as soon as we're done here. Come on, let's get—Fuck!"

Tessandra turned her head to see what had suddenly made him mad, and she gasped. Another group of men were coming from an opposite street and entering the large residence, but they weren't alone.

Tightly bound by a large rope and her mouth gagged, she clearly recognized Nana.

"Shit! What the fuck were those bloody Cheshi doing?!"

"I wouldn't blame them," sighed Sabael. "I bet my sister couldn't sit still and tried to help anyway..."

"Why did they capture her?!"

"They probably saw her lighting those fires, they know she's working with us. They might try to use her as a hostage, maybe?"

Oh, fuck no," groaned Tessandra. "I swear if they touch a hair on Nana's head, I'm going to fucking unleash hell on those damn bastards."

"I'm going to have to agree with that..."

Sabael looked worried for his little sister. They remained hidden a few seconds longer, watching Naptunie get taken inside. Tessandra had planned to just set fire to the building, but with Naptunie in there, it would be hard, they had to extract

her first. She tried to analyze the building. It was a fortress indeed: high stone walls with a tower at each end, and even the gates were heavily guarded. From what she could evaluate, the fortress was at least six or seven times the size of any house they had seen, perhaps more.

"We need to get Nana out, and quickly," she muttered. "...Any idea how to get in there?" "I could pretend to be one of them?"

"Sab, everybody saw your face in that plaza, none of them will believe that. Chances are at least one of those bastards will recognize you... I'd be of the opinion to barge in, but if they use Naptunie as hostage, it's not worth it. I have no idea of the layout of that place, they might kill her before I even get to her. Damn it, I should have just jumped out as soon as we saw her..."

"They could have used her as a hostage all the same... Frankly, I'm surprised my sister got caught. She's smart, if she wanted to flee, she wouldn't have been caught so easily!"

"No time for that, Sab, we have to go in... Should we split up? You distract them and I climb up the side? They won't think of you as much of a threat compared to me, no offense. That could leave me the time to climb over, grab Nana, and get out of there."

"That could work, but like you said, you have no idea how it is inside!"

"Damn it... If only we had a dragon here," groaned Tessandra. "We could have a view from the top!"

"Let's just go with your plan," Sabael shook his head. "I don't like leaving my sis in there any longer, so let's—"

Before he finished his sentence, a huge explosion blew out behind them. Both ran out of their hiding place, their eyes on the vivid column of fire coming from the Yekara residence. Their people were pouring out, many of them screaming or shouting in utter panic, but Tessandra was most shocked by the fire itself. It was a bright blue color.

"Don't tell me..."

"Tessa! Sabael!"

To their own surprise, they suddenly spotted Naptunie herself, running out of the crowd, her dress a bit burnt but the rope and her gag gone. She looked out of breath, with soot on her face and one of her buns undone.

"Nana, what the heck?!" exclaimed Tessandra.

"I did it!" she said proudly. "I did it! I-I told the Cheshi that were with me about the plan, and they agreed to help me out! I knew that if I managed to get inside the Yekara residence, I could trigger an explosion that would drive them out and cause panic in their ranks! I know you told me not to, but the second I realized their residence was made of the same type of

stone I used to—”

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” exclaimed Tessandra. “Have you gone mad? You could have blown yourself up

with them! Nana, what the hell were you thinking?!”

“I-I just wanted to help,” muttered Nana, suddenly vexed. “I couldn’t just stand on the side when I knew I could help!”

“...Told you,” sighed her older brother.

Tessandra’s eyes went back to the huge fire behind her. It was even more mind-blowing to see the culprit’s small

silhouette against the raging fire behind them. She sighed.

“Oh, Nana. I’m starting to think you and Darsan really are one hell of a dangerous match...”

“M-me and Prince Darsan?” Nana blushed.

“Yeah. Your destructive power is quite a match, at least,” scoffed Tessandra.

“B-but I did a useful thing, right? This way, we can push the odds toward our side and get their attention away from the castle!”

“We came with the exact same idea, only you beat us to it... At least we got what we wanted.”

Things were indeed getting a lot more heated where they stood. The three of them were almost standing in plain sight,

but their enemies didn’t even have the luxury to bother with their presence. The Yekara were, just as they had predicted,

completely thrown off by their main residence being attacked. Many were running inside or out, trying to save some of their

belongings, while others were trying to find ways to tame the blue wildfire created by Naptunie. In fact, they might even have

been more scared by the impossible colors of this fire, which kept burning despite the rain. Not only that, but several smaller

explosions were following at irregular paces, the fire probably finding its way through the building for more things to combust... Sabael sighed.

“I’m thinking that’s your influence doing scary things to my little sister,” he whispered to Tessandra.

“Don’t blame it on me, I don’t push such ideas onto our Nana!”

“I just wanted to help!” insisted Naptunie, visibly getting embarrassed. “It’s not that complicated either, really, only

basic geology applied to some chemistry, and a bit of... well, anyway, I can take care of myself! S-so, is Lady Cessilia alright?

And His Majesty?”

“They left for the castle a while ago, and I sure hope so,” nodded Tessandra.

All three of them turned their eyes toward the castle, witnessing the exact moment when Jinn the Red Dragon suddenly

wreaked havoc on one of the towers. Several large stone bricks fell to the side, destroying more of the castle or the island it

stood on before loudly splashing in the surrounding body of water. Tessandra grimaced.

"Fucking untamed dragon... That beast might become a serious problem if he keeps going."

"Wait, that dragon is not one of yours?" exclaimed Sabael.

"You just realized that now? It's not, that bitch Jisel is the owner of that one. No wonder he's such a pain in the arse..."

Teenage dragons are the absolute worst, they have no self control, and this one doesn't even have a proper master either. A real nightmare. If something happens to that bitch and he goes on a rampage... But don't worry, I'm sure Cessilia will be able to handle it. She grew up with eight dragons around, this one is just a brat waiting to get his scaled butt kicked!"

"Shouldn't we go and help?" asked Nana, sending anxious glances at the castle.

"I'm not too worried about those two," Tessandra shook her head. "That stupid Red Dragon wouldn't be causing such a mess if he wasn't angry or had gotten to his prey already. It looks fine so far... Heck, I bet Cessilia is the one unleashing hell inside right now. No, we should go and help Kassian, Darsan, and our dragons. From what I saw, the situation isn't exactly the best on their side, and I do not want the Yekara to get reinforcements from the outside. We've got enough on our plates here already."

"That's true," nodded Sabael. "They might not all be on the Yekara's side, but if word got out that the doors are open, more people will try to sneak into the Capital, which will only cause more issues. If they get in, those fights may not stop even if His Majesty wins. We need to calm the people outside."

"Will Sir Darsan be alright?"

"Drop the Sir, Nana. But yeah, that idiot could probably use a hand. He might be strong, but even he can't guard a whole bridge by himself if he's overwhelmed by the numbers... Let's just trust Cessi and her man will be alright and regroup with Kassian and Bastat first. Nana, I suppose it's no use to tell you to stay out of it?"

"I'm coming with you!"

"Got it. But please let us know next time you blow something up. Sab and I were seconds away from rushing inside that building too!"

"Oh, sorry..."

"Alright," chuckled Sabael. "Let's go before they notice us for real."

If the Yekara had noticed the trio, nobody would have done anything to stop them. They were still busy trying to control Naptunie's devastating fire, and hardly succeeding at all. Nana even had a little satisfied smile on as they heard a couple more explosions behind them while running toward the other end of the island. They did get into quite a handful of fights on their way, though. There wasn't a single peaceful street anymore. Most of the time, it was only people running in one direction or

another, barricading their houses and shops, but Tessandra and Sabael did have to stop to get between mercenaries and the locals they were trying to rob several times, or to help some citizens that had managed to corner a Yekara soldier. Strangely, Tessandra's armor was acting like a flag, as everyone they ran across immediately recognized the light green dragon scales, and many even cheered for them.

As they kept running, they crossed paths with more and more people. In each street, there were men standing in front of doors, ready to defend their homes, or people fighting off those that were now considered invaders. Needless to say, the trio was often welcomed, but not always really needed. The Yekara were either running back to protect their main residence, rushing to one of the main battles going on, or simply struggling to handle an infuriated group of folks. The fight looked like it would go on for a while, without really any clear winner. It was too scattered, too disorganized. Despite their advantage in numbers, Tessandra could see the locals were struggling, only trying to defend their own houses and not bothering to pursue them once the Yekara had given up. Their best luck would be to prevent them from regrouping. Right now, the island's unique architecture was working in their favor, forcing the troops to divide into small numbers and launch small attacks in the many streets. Tessandra and Sabael were doing their best to get rid of those they could, but they were also aware that the situation probably wasn't as good elsewhere; many people had decided to hide in their homes rather than risk their lives, which seemed fair. Pans and pitchforks could only get them so far against seasoned fighters. As the three of them got closer to the downtown part of the Capital, the chaos intensified; this was clearly the second epicenter of the battle, and soon, Tessandra and Sabael found themselves constantly fighting to push their way through while also protecting Nana. She had grabbed a small dagger along the way, but she only used it in extreme cases of self-defense, or to assist her brother or Tessandra when it was safe enough for her to. Naptunie was in no way a fighter, but she was smart enough to evaluate the risks, and find herself safe spots to hide behind them. Her smaller frame, compared to Tessandra or her older brother, was also helping her get past some groups of soldiers without being noticed. She quickly managed to find herself in the midst of their allies, where Kassian had taken control of a group of half-experienced fighters.

The first line was mainly composed of Royal Guards who had quickly understood that the King's side was not with the Yekara people, and had allied themselves with the man wearing dragon armor, as well as the Lady of the Sehsan Tribe. Bastat

was also fighting; the young woman had already switched weapons and was now using what looked like a long and elegant metallic rope, with colored, round weights at each end. She captured man after man with those, and threw them at the feet of the soldiers for the locals who only then had to finish the job. Her main task, though, was clearly to oversee the whole fight. While Kassian was at the forefront, at the center of the crossroads, Lady Bastat stood several steps behind him, towering the battle from what seemed like a large wooden box. She was regularly shouting orders, and Nana quickly spotted lines of archers on the roofs around them, all wearing the colored outfits characteristic of her tribe. Eluding the fights and slithering through the crowd, Naptunie ran to her.

"Lady Bastat!"

"Lady Naptunie? Where did you come from?! What about His Majesty? And Lady Cessilia?"

"They are at the castle! They are fine... we think."

"Lady Tessandra is with you?"

"Yes! Over there!"

Naptunie turned around, pointing at the area she had left Tessandra at. Bastat nodded, looking relieved. Then, she helped Naptunie climb next to her on her wooden box, quickly showing her their current status. They were at the end of the street, right where the large and main crossroad of the city began. It was the other very large plaza Naptunie knew well, for the roads from the two bridges of the west lead to this, from the north and south part of the island respectively, and then spread like a spider's web to all the smaller streets. On most days, there would even be a large market there, but right now, the whole place was a lot more chaotic than on a market day. In fact, Naptunie couldn't even spot any of the familiar cobblestone pathways, all of them literally flooded with people fighting. It wasn't a pleasant sight. She had stayed with Tessandra and Sabael so far and mostly witnessed one-sided victories, but right here, the fighting was much more violent, bloody, and deadly. Some people were even trampling on the bodies gathered on the ground, and on one side, a house had been set on fire, threatening to spread the flames to all the nearby habitations. People were trying to contain the fire, but they also had to deal with the Yekara soldiers trying to fight them from the other side. It was a chaotic fight. The only place where she could actually draw a clear line between their side and the enemy was the very center of the plaza, where there was a half-circle empty in front of Prince Kassian. His fighting skills were nothing but matching his cousin's; his movements were absolutely flawless. Even Naptunie and

her non-existent combat training could tell his level was far above anyone else's on the plaza.

"His Highness has been able to prevent them from going any further," explained Bastat, "but we believe most of the

Yekara have orders to seize control of this area. Luckily, we are not alone, the civilians are not having it, as you can see..."

Naptunie quickly analyzed the area, remembering the countless maps she had studied; it made sense for the enemy to

want control of that specific area. Just like the other one her brother had almost died in, it was a major crossroad on the

Capital's island. If they could block it, people wouldn't be able to access another area without making a large detour, and they

would gain control of all the streets leading up to that place! Not only that, but burning the buildings, like they had begun doing,

was another way to prevent people from fleeing. With the fire spreading, the locals wouldn't even be able to use their back

doors to get to the adjacent street if they had one! She frowned, annoyed. Prince

Kassian was indeed doing a great job of

keeping the Yekara from taking control, but both sides were stuck there, and neither was managing to overwhelm the other.

Unlike in the streets, in a large open area like this, their close and well-trained ranks were a huge advantage for the Yekara

soldiers, while the citizens were easily pushed back and cornered one by one. Bastat's archers saved several lives while

Naptunie was analyzing the scene, but it wouldn't be enough.

"What do we do, what do we do...?" muttered Naptunie, thinking long and hard.

"Nana!"

Finally, Tessandra appeared next to them, looking out of breath, Sabael just steps behind her and still fighting an opponent.

"When the hell did you get here?!"

"I just did! Tessandra, I think we—"

A loud bang suddenly shook the area. Everyone lowered their head by reflex, before debris suddenly came flying down

from above. Nana's scream died in her throat as she felt someone grab her and push her against a wall.

"What's happening?!" she cried, panicked.

"Stay there!"

She nodded. She wouldn't have been able to move an inch either way. Tessandra was literally pressing her against the

wall behind them, Lady Bastat on her left. Nana glanced over Tessandra's arm to see the situation; it was as if something had

exploded in the middle of the plaza, leaving a large hole in the cobblestones. The reason for that bang was found right above

the hole: a large, round, and heavy-looking piece of metal full of large spikes. That horrible thing hadn't just crushed a portion

of the ground, but also a dozen people, some screaming and laying in their own blood, while those who had been injured but could still move were trying to crawl away, only to be attacked right away by the Yekara. "They're using fucking catapults!" shouted Tessandra. "Kassian!"

However, the Prince didn't hear her, and was already rushing near the impact point to try and save those people.

Naptunie spotted her brother suddenly running in the same direction.

"Damn it!"

Another bang exploded, even louder. The next one had hit a building, projecting more debris around, and injuring twice

as many people. Naptunie screamed again, more horrified and terrified. Those things were blowing open whole buildings!

"They are aiming at the citizens!" shouted Bastat. "Everyone, reform the ranks, now! Mix with the Yekara!"

It was easier said than done. Although it was clear the projectiles were sent into their side of the crowds, the citizens

just couldn't run ahead of the Yekara, it was about as dangerous and risky. The whole area had turned from a disorganized

battle into complete chaos, the crowd running in all directions in fear of the next attack.

Another suddenly appeared, and Nana

closed her eyes, afraid it was coming their way. She heard a loud noise, and felt the ground trembling again, debris collapsing above of her.

"Nana! You alright?"

She dared to open her eyes. Tessandra had raised her sword above them to protect them from the debris, and her body

was acting like a shield for Nana too. However, blood suddenly appeared on her face, a long trail running from her hairline to

her chin. The vision of Tessandra injured suddenly had an effect like another bang for Naptunie. She opened her eyes wide,

pinched her lips and frowned.

"No!" she suddenly exclaimed.

"W-what?"

Before Tessandra could add a word, Naptunie suddenly got down and escaped her protection, running out to see the damages.

"Nana, come back!"

She wasn't listening at all. Naptunie's eyes were going left, right, analyzing the scene of each crash without any fear for

her own safety. When Tessandra caught up with her, she suddenly spun around before the fighter could say a word.

"They are firing from the direction of the bridge we didn't leave Sir Darsan nor one of the dragons at! Judging from the

distance, they must be right outside the Outer Wall! And if I'm right, they can't fire any farther than this, but I don't know how

many catapults they have!"

"Are you sure?" muttered Tessandra, shocked.

"Absolutely sure!"

Naptunie's eyes did show how confident she was. Tessandra glanced around; she had no idea how the hell she was able to calculate that, but she had to believe Nana either way. For most people, those things seemed to appear truly out of nowhere, and the speed didn't give them any time for analysis, nor to run. Another one appeared in the sky, and Tessandra grabbed Nana again to take her to what she hoped to be a safe spot. They protected their heads and waited until the damage was done.

"Judging from the rhythm, they have at least two," said Nana, coughing from some dust.

"Two catapults. But they have

to be really big to carry such a heavy weight, and by the time they recharge..."

"Nana, Nana, calm down! Focus. You said those things can't go any farther, right? Can you tell the farthest they can land? What is the safe zone?"

Naptunie turned around, quickly doing the math. Tessandra had asked the question just in case, but she did not actually expect Nana to be able to predict this much... She was proven wrong once again when Nana's little finger pointed at the end of a nearby building.

"From there... to there," she said. "I'm almost sure they cannot hit any farther than that!"

"A-alright... Alright, I'll get Kassian to move our side to that area. But Nana, he's going to need my help here, too many people got hit already. Someone needs to stop those machines."

"Understood!"

Nana waited and a couple of seconds of silence passed as she seemed to wait for Tessandra to turn to someone else.

When Tessandra raised an eyebrow, her confident expression sank.

"Y-you can't mean... me?"

"Don't worry, I'm not sending you alone to destroy those. But you showed us you can sneak past the fighting, and you know the area like the back of your hand too. Just get to the bridge where Krai is, and take him with you to destroy those things."

"W-w-what?!" exclaimed Naptunie, turning pale. "Tessa, you can't expect me to borrow Sir Dragon like that!"

"He likes you Nana! Don't worry, he's smarter than he looks, he'll listen!"

"B-but I don't even have a single beignet with me! And I'll be going alone? He can't possibly listen to me like that!"

"I said, he likes you! Not just your beignets! Just go, Nana, hurry!"

A bit reluctantly, Naptunie turned around, and Tessandra pushed her toward what she had indicated as the safe zone.

Nana glanced back; the situation was dire in the plaza. Many people had been injured by the falling spiky weights, and the

Yekara were running to regain the area they had lost. She took a deep breath, spotting her brother amidst the confusion. She would be useless here. She could probably do something if it was with Sir Dragon's help. He'd listen, right?

Trying not to think too much, Naptunie turned around and ran quickly.

"Oh, Sir Dragon," she muttered to herself, "I really hope you're in a good mood..."

Naptunie kept muttering to herself as she ran, trying to manage her breathing whilst being cautious of her surroundings;

she was good at avoiding fights, but the area she was headed toward seemed to be the most dangerous of all. There were

Yekara soldiers and mercenaries everywhere, and she had to retrace her steps or hide several times to avoid them. A couple of

times, she even had no choice but to climb on top of a house, over the roof, and land on the next street to avoid them. It was just

as she had predicted: the farther she got from the main place where Kassian,

Tessandra and Sabael fought, the harder it was to

switch from one street to another. Right now, she was doing her very best to use everything she knew about the area to keep out of trouble.

She could still hear the projectiles violently hitting buildings or the ground far behind her, and every time, she feared

for the others' lives. If it wasn't for that sound, regularly echoing behind her, perhaps Naptunie would have given up on

Tessandra's crazy idea. At least, it seemed crazy to her. She wasn't just going to see Sir Dragon, she was supposed to actually

convince the beast to attack a different area, and very specific weapons too! Nana had no idea how she was going to do that,

though. She had never missed her family's beignets so much... Still, she kept running, thinking she'd figure out the situation once

she got there... Luckily, as she diverted from the path to the one leading to the bridge Krai was on, she met less and less Yekara

soldiers. In fact, many were running in the opposite direction, and couldn't be bothered with a Dorosef girl running on her own.

The closer she got to the bridge, though, the more Nana's worries shifted from the explosions and men behind her, to the loud, terrifying growls she was running toward.

The Inner Wall's gates had been completely abandoned, to her surprise, and she arrived there to find the area

completely deserted. On the other side of those gates, though, she could hear absolute carnage going on.

Naptunie stopped behind the gates, a cold chill running down her spine. She could hear the dragon's loud growls and

men screaming, shouting behind, the sound of swords clashing, and even bodies splashing into the water from time to time. Not

only that, but the ground under her was literally shaking. She couldn't blame the men for having abandoned that area of the city;

she was regretting being there herself... Trying to keep in mind the urgency of the situation and the sight of a dragon calmly eating beignets out of her hand, Naptunie closed her fists, and after a deep breath, used all of her strength to push the heavy gates. Just that already took a lot of effort and a little while as she had never realized how heavy those really were. She struggled to push them until she could sneak past, stepping alone on the bridge. Or, more accurately, alone on her side of the bridge.

The other end was, as she had imagined, a bloody massacre. Krai's large body was occupying almost all of the bridge's width, and even its black tail was dangerously swishing left and right, a few yards ahead of where Nana stood. The dragon's back and butt were mostly blocking her sight, but the little she could see from what was happening on the other side already terrified her. There was a lot of blood. Not only that, but she could see human limbs regularly being thrown sideways, some ending up in the river when the dragon didn't enthusiastically chomp it mid-air.

"Oh, holy fish..." she muttered.

Nana had already seen a lot of blood and bodies today, but a dragon devouring living humans was a whole new level of horror for her. She could see the Black Dragon was having fun, toying around with them, its large paw suddenly squishing a human body against the white bricks of the bridge. Naptunie took a deep breath. She was supposed to bother Sir Dragon in the middle of that? Had Tessandra gone insane?! There was no way she wouldn't be gobbled up too! Still, she could hear, and now also see, the large spiky balls of metal flying in the sky to brutally land in the Capital. Nana didn't even need to think about the damages done; the mere confirmation that she had been right, the projectiles coming from the Outer Wall, was enough to reassure her she had been right to run here.

Despite that, she only dared to take a couple of steps toward the dragon; she had to admire the men on the other side, who were still fighting hard to try and get past anyway despite the large, bloody piles of bodies already spread across the bridge... Krai didn't even need to move much; the humans were running right in the dragon's direction, swords up, and a large bite was enough to welcome them and chomp three men's bodies at once. Naptunie stood there for several seconds, trying to think about the best way to get the dragon's attention without being the next one eaten up. As much as she trusted Tessandra, she really didn't have much confidence in taming a dragon when she didn't have the right treat for it... or she potentially was the treat herself.

With pearls of sweat running down her nape, she cautiously stepped forward.

"S-Sir Dragon?" she called out.

She was almost relieved when she got no response. She took another deep breath, immediately followed by a huge bang behind her, which gave her the wave of bravery to try again. If her friends' life depended on her, she could do it!

"Sir Dragon!"

This time, Krai suddenly lifted its large head, and one red eye finally spotted Naptunie, standing alone in the middle of the bridge. Naptunie felt her bravery melt like snow under the sun. Luckily, so did all her ability to move, and when the dragon turned around to face her, completely ignoring the dozens of men, its hips swooped across the bridge in the process, she could only try to take deep breaths and keep the blood flowing to her brain.

"H-hi..." she heard her voice mutter.

The dragon's head suddenly came to meet her, snout first, strangely lowered and grazing the ground as if it was trying to match her height. Even more disturbing was the blood-covered human hand hanging out from between two fangs. Naptunie blinked twice, and forced herself to look up at the pair of glowing ruby eyes.

"I-I kind of need your help..." she muttered.

The dragon tilted its head, almost in a cute way. She could hear the blades on the other side trying to attack the wall of scales, but as soon as they got a bit annoying, the huge scaled butt and paws would move a bit, and suddenly crush more of them underneath. The stomping was enough to make the whole bridge tremble and creak, making Nana fear it would actually collapse under its weight... It was built to let horses and carriages through, but not a gigantic creature like a full-grown dragon!

When Krai growled softly, its breathing reaching her in hot waves of air, Naptunie took another deep breath.

"W-we need to get over there," she said, trying to talk fast, "to the other bridge, outside the wall, and destroy the catapults! I-I know it's not the original p-plan, but Lady Tessa sent me, and, uh... it's important..."

The more she spoke, the more she realized the chance the dragon caught any of that were rather low. She had always seen Tessandra and Cessilia casually speak to the dragon, and Krai seemed to somehow understand the gist of it, but this was her first time alone! She tried to imagine she was speaking to the family cat, before realizing it wouldn't help either. The dragon was probably smarter, to some extent... Naptunie glanced to the side, feeling increasingly nervous. She was wasting so much time right now! She could endure the gruesomeness of the dragon, but if she lost any time here, more lives would be lost, and she did not want to be responsible for this!

Nana clenched her small fists, and tried to imagine what the pair of Princesses would do in her stead. Her eyes went back to the piece of limb hanging from the dragon's maw, still very disturbing.

"D-drop it!"

She had tried to put as much intent as she could, and even pointed her index toward the ground. However, after a few seconds of silence, the dragon began to very slowly resume chewing.

"N-no, I said drop it! Oh, come on, that's... a bit disgusting... I'm sure it's not really good for your stomach either, Sir

Dragon... Yuck..."

Naptunie felt like she was going to be sick. Either she was misunderstood or the dragon was mocking her, she couldn't

tell. A few seconds later, at least, there was nothing left of the gruesome body, but some blood on the dark scales. This, she

could endure. Still, Naptunie knew she had to get control of that dragon, for everyone's sake. She glanced to the side again. It

was just a few yards away. Just a dragon's big jump...

"We need to go!" she declared.

Clenching her fists and persuading herself she could do it, she suddenly walked up to the dragon. While she was hoping

very hard not to get gobbled up for her impertinence, she was even more surprised to hear Krai growl, very softly, and turn its

head to the side, following her. Still, Nana kept going until she reached its side and carefully began climbing. She didn't

remember it being so high... She wasn't very fit, and the climb itself was a lot. Panting and grunting, Naptunie kept going,

telling herself at least the dragon wouldn't try and bite its own neck... She finally reached the top, and found herself right at the

collar.

Krai suddenly raised its head, and she had no choice but to grab the first thing she could, falling forward with her arms

around the dragons' neck. While well aware of the ridiculousness of her position, Naptunie couldn't help but hang on even

tighter, praying not to fall off... When the dragon was fully standing up and somewhat stable, she tried to repress her desire to cry.

"A-alright... There! We need to go there, please!"

It took all of her strength to raise an arm in said direction, and it took less than a second before Krai suddenly took off,

surprisingly obeying her right away. Naptunie didn't see much, aside from the ground and sea moving quickly under them, and

hearing the desperate scream in her ears.

One second later, they brutally landed, and she heard many, many men shouting. She forced herself to sit up, despite

literally all her limbs trembling. Krai didn't even wait for her to say anything; the dragon was well aware of what to do when

dozens of men ran in its direction with their swords up and obvious aggressive attitudes. Naptunie could only hang on for dear life once more. The dragon began to violently jump, left and right, moving around like a terrible earthquake under her. Not only that, but she heard men shouting, and more of the dragon's growls, which terrified her. Nana wanted to scream, but she didn't even dare move a muscle, including her jaw. She had no idea how long it lasted, but it felt way, way too long. Nana closed her eyes as hard as she could, crying and hoping it would end soon. Suddenly, it stopped. She could still hear dragon growls, but the earthshaking had miraculously stopped. Two large hands came out of nowhere, and she felt herself being grabbed under her armpits, and despite how stunned she was, she was dragged off the dragon's back.

"Nana!"

She opened her eyes upon recognizing the familiar voice. Holding her at arms' length, a huge smile on his face, was none other than Darsan. His hair was an absolute mess, and his face covered with dirt and dried blood, but he looked happier than ever, his dark eyes sparkling with joy.

"What are you doing here?!" he exclaimed, gently putting her down.

Nana's legs almost gave out when they actually met the ground, but fortunately, Darsan's hands didn't leave her waist.

For a second, she got a bit dizzy, and had to remind herself to breathe and think.

"Th-the ca-... The c-catapults... We came here to..."

"Oh, those?"

Darsan finally let go and stepped back, to point somewhere behind him at a large pile of wood that were indeed

catapults just seconds ago. They were all taken care of already, literally wrecked apart, reduced to large pieces of wood. Krai

was already going through the mess, its claw digging through as if looking for a toy or something. Suddenly, the Black Dragon

seemed to have found what it had been looking for: one large, spiky ball that was meant to be sent over the wall. While it

began enthusiastically playing around with it, the few men that hadn't been crushed in the ordeal took their chance to run away,

absolutely terrified by the sight of the big Black Dragon. It seemed like the wild rodeo from earlier had been somewhat

justified, in the end. Nana let out a faint sigh of relief.

"Thank the gods it's taken care of," she muttered, thinking about the people in the plaza.

"Yep!"

"B-but Prince Darsan, what are you doing here?"

"I heard you scream, and I saw Krai, so I ran over here! I mean, I was in the area, anyway, so—"

"What? But what about the bridge you were supposed to guard?!"

Naptunie's mind panicked, thinking Darsan had completely abandoned the southwest bridge to come over here. Or was he perhaps forced to flee? He didn't look like someone who had lost a fight... He was messy, for sure, but she couldn't spot a single injury on him. Still, Naptunie couldn't understand why he was here and not on the bridge. She was already having scary thoughts of angry men destroying the gates, invading the city... However, before her imagination ran any wilder, Darsan grimaced, visibly embarrassed.

"Yeah, uh... About that... About that bridge, I may have, uh... caused a little bit of an accident..."

"What? Don't tell me you... you destroyed the bridge?"

"I didn't mean to!" he said, trying to explain himself. "I really didn't! But that thing was just a bit too weak, you know, and I may have, uh... used a bit too much strength while fighting, so it began to crack all of a sudden, and by the time I ran back to the edge, splash! I-it fell down into the river..."

"You destroyed the bridge?!" exclaimed Nana, getting mad all of a sudden. "You actually destroyed the bridge! Do you know how long it took to build it?! And how many bricks of white stone were used too?! And that bridge was really important, it was helping the flow of traffic into the Capital, it led straight to one of the biggest markets for the people that were coming from the south! Now everyone is going to have to take a long detour around to get into the Capital, not to mention the inconveniences, increased traffic, and even the time it's going to take to repair that bridge!"

"I'm very, very sorry..." muttered Darsan, whilst making himself smaller in front of the infuriated Nana. "I didn't know..."

There were even frustrated tears appearing in her eyes, and her accusatory look was literally pinning Darsan where he was with guilt. He certainly hadn't expected it to be such a big deal, and Naptunie's sudden burst of anger and tears was taking him completely by surprise. His body moved like it was torn between running to her or in the opposite direction.

"You have to rebuild it!"

"I-I will!" he exclaimed, seeing a light of hope. "I swear I'm going to put it back brick by brick if needed!"

Nana let out a heavy annoyed sigh. The truth was, she knew it wasn't a matter for tears at all. Darsan's mistake had just happened right after one of the most traumatic moments of her life, and seemed to be the next best thing for her to unleash her already battered nerves on, after they'd been put through an awful lot for the previous hour. Of course, she was genuinely

horrified about the bridge being gone, but it seemed like quite a secondary matter, given the situation... Naptunie looked around. Since there was one bridge Darsan had destroyed, and Krai had gone on a rampage here, they could consider these two entry points into the city now completely blocked, which could still work to their advantage.

"Don't be mad, alright?" said Darsan, still visibly worried. "I promise I will do my best. There's still a bit left too..."

Naptunie turned back to him. The Prince looked almost pitiful now, trying to justify his mistake and be forgiven. He was a head taller than her, but right now, he was keeping his shoulders and head low, and his fingers were all fidgety. Nana sighed.

"I... I think it will be fine," she said, a bit embarrassed about her earlier shouting. "It's not really important right now.

Is... uh... Sir Shiny Dragon alright?"

"Kian? Oh, yeah, he's doing completely fine. I mean, last I saw, he was hanging on great."

"A-alright. Then, I think this area is secure now, so we should leave Sir Dragon at the next bridge, and get back inside the city. I think everyone could use our help."

Darsan gave her a strong nod and enthusiastically punched his palm.

"I like that plan! Let's do that!"

"But you can't destroy any more bridges!" Nana added, raising her index finger with a cute frown.

"I-I won't! I really won't..."

Naptunie sighed a bit, but turned around, looking at the Black Dragon. Krai was still happily digging through the mess of ruined catapults to find more spiky balls to play with, or happily hunting down the few unfortunate men that hadn't been running fast enough.

"Sir Dragon!"

She had made sure to shout loud enough for him to hear and, to her surprise, the dragon immediately turned its large head her way, its big red eyes opened wide with a curious expression. Nana tried to swallow the wave of anxiousness that was coming back. Would she be able to ride the dragon again after the fright from earlier?

"Let's go!"

Before she could say a word, Darsan suddenly grabbed her around the waist, and in two movements, lifted Nana onto the Black Dragon's back. Krai moved right away, but this time, Naptunie was actually able to hold onto Darsan, who was much more stable. She even managed to keep her eyes open to witness the Black Dragon taking a couple of long leaps to the next bridge, getting back to where she had gotten him from. They told the dragon to stay there and guard it. Then, Darsan helped her

down, but he didn't let go of her hand while they ran back toward the city.

"Let's go get my sister and the others!" he exclaimed with a big smile, running on the bridge.

Naptunie was literally dragged behind him, but surprisingly, Darsan managed to clear the way in front of them without

having to let go of her hand at all. He swung his large sword left and right, sending the Yekara soldiers flying with incredible

strength. Nana was now starting to understand how the bridge had collapsed...

The two of them ran all the way back, nothing and no one capable of stopping them.

Unlike Nana who had been forced

to take detours to avoid confronting any of the enemy, Darsan was more than happy to run head first into the crowd. The young

Prince's colossal strength was knocking any enemy out of the way in a blow or two, allowing the two of them to simply run in a

straight line, not taking any detours at all. Thanks to that, they got back to the main plaza even faster than Nana would have

thought, and completely unscathed too.

However, once they got there, she quickly realized the situation at the main battlefield was still very complicated. From

behind Darsan, she tried to assess the situation, glancing below his arms and in between their enemies to see the damages. The

background had changed again, and not in a good way. Not only had more spiky balls been sent before Krai got to the catapults,

damaging the roads and buildings around, but fires had been started too. While the crowd seemed to have doubled, it wasn't

exactly in their favor. A lot of the civilians had run or were busy trying to save their family and friends, doing their best to

avoid the Yekara fighters and, if possible, leaving the area. The Yekara soldiers and their mercenary allies, however, had used

the newly caused damages to gain more ground. Soon, they found themselves facing a dozen of them, and Darsan had no choice

but to let go of Nana's hand.

"Stay behind me!"

Even if he hadn't said so, Naptunie would have never dared to take a step ahead. The road in front of them was

completely blocked by those men and, even more fearsome, the powerful swings of Darsan's sword were much too terrifying.

If he could send grown soldiers in heavy armor flying that easily, Nana knew she could be swept across the island in a blink!

At least, it seemed she was completely safe by staying a couple of steps behind the Prince; everyone around and behind them

was dead, dying, or stunned. While Darsan fought effortlessly, there were still an awful amount of Yekara soldiers here,

slowing them down. Had more gathered over here after two bridges had been made unusable, and their main residence burned?

Naptunie and Darsan had arrived from the opposite side of where she had left Tessandra and the others, but she couldn't really tell how the battle had evolved. The smoke coming up from the burning buildings, along with the rain, was permeating the whole scene with a dense gray fog. It was stinging her eyes a bit too. She was getting gradually more nervous, forced to hide behind Darsan and unable to do anything. And it wasn't in Nana's nature to do nothing. As soon as she saw an opportunity, Naptunie ran to the nearest safe building, and began climbing up. Careful not to injure herself, she kept Darsan in sight, but she still had to see where they needed to go.

Once she found herself on the roof, Naptunie took a second to secure her position, making sure she wouldn't slide or fall and unnecessarily bother Darsan. Then, she took a look around, squinting and trying to protect her eyes from the bothersome fumes. She quickly spotted Prince Kassian and his shiny dragon scale armor, still flawlessly dominating the battle.

Once again, there was a small field around him where none of the enemies dared to approach. His blades were moving at an incredible speed, and Nana realized he might have switched weapons. She even saw him stab someone with his sword, steal one of the men's knives and throw it across the field, and get his sword back again before the first body hit the ground. It was impressive. Now she had seen all of them fight; Naptunie was realizing that although they had all been trained by the same War God, Cessilia, Darsan, Kassian, and Tessandra all had their own style of fighting. Darsan didn't need any fancy movements, his brute force was already beyond what most men could handle. He probably didn't have the patience either, he just enjoyed fighting as if it was all in fun, leaving his opponents no chance. Once in a while, he'd get a worthy opponent able to handle him, and he would change his actions a bit, finding the best way to break them down. His attacks were brutal and merciless. His brother, on the other hand, managed to be faster, using less strength but sharper, more effective movements. Naptunie knew little to nothing about the intricacies of sword fighting, but her eyes were learning a lot just from watching either one of the Princes move. Despite the differences between them, she couldn't even tell who was actually better. She had a hunch the older brother was slightly more detailed and precise, but it felt like Darsan was being playful on purpose, and only got serious for brief moments.

Feeling better since the Prince was safe, she tried to find Tessandra or Lady Bastat next. Naptunie's heart sank when she realized the building they had been on previously was currently on fire. Had something happened to them? Her nervousness

on the rise, she kept looking around until she finally spotted Tessandra. The Princess seemed completely fine, and even a little bit excited. Her green armor was covered in blood, which was why it had taken Nana an extra minute to find her, but she was fighting more fiercely than ever, a grin stuck on her lips as if she was having some fun. Naptunie quickly spotted her own brother, just steps behind her, who seemed not only to be fighting, but also helping to evacuate those who were injured. He looked fine too, perhaps a bit rougher than Tessandra, his face covered in soot, but she knew her big brother, he could pull through anything. He was probably focused more on rescuing than fighting too. She couldn't catch sight of Lady Bastat, though, even after searching for several minutes. Did she leave the area for some reason? Or perhaps was she with the injured? From where she was, Naptunie could easily see how their numbers had been reduced. They had lost a third of the people that were fighting with them before, while the Yekara had gained about the same amount of fighters, she was almost certain. She could see the spiky balls had caused a lot of damage, digging holes in the ground, with bodies spread around the impact areas... Not only that, but the few fires were blocking some roads and making some areas more difficult to stay in, allowing the Yekara soldiers to win some ground and control in the plaza too. Nana's heart sank. They were not doing well. Prince Kassian was still bravely securing the space he was in, but the soldiers were almost surrounding him now. Things were taking a better turn with Darsan's arrival, though. The younger Prince was easily sweeping the enemies out of the way, virtually digging a hole in the crowd of fighters. There was nothing and no one able to stop him, and he was making his way, slowly but surely, to meet his brother in the middle of the battlefield. Naptunie couldn't help but be a bit proud, until she realized he had gotten quite far. Far from her, still perched on her rooftop. She glanced down, only to nervously realize he hadn't just left bodies behind. There were men down there, who hadn't noticed her. Yet. Naptunie took a big breath and wiped her eyes, teary from the smoke. She realized, those men were there for the same reason; they didn't dare to approach Darsan, and they couldn't back down either, the smoke was too strong behind them. She could even hear more people coughing from there... Suddenly, she realized something. Darsan and Kassian were both also surrounded by the smoke, but unlike the men around them, they weren't bothered. Nana gasped, wondering if she was wrong. Perhaps were they somehow moving enough air around them? It didn't seem like it.

The mix of rain, smoke, and dust caused by all the collapsed buildings had created a dangerous mix of heavy smoke that was hindering most of the men on the battlefield; that explained why so many civilians had evacuated the area, while the stubborn Yekara soldiers were doing their very best to hang on. Still, the more she watched, the more Nana was sure: the Dragon Princes didn't mind the smoke at all! In fact, it made sense. If they had the same abilities as their sister and cousin, fire shouldn't be much of an issue for them... and neither was smoke. So excited about her finding, Naptunie wanted to tell Darsan or Tessandra, but she realized she was still way too far! She glanced around; she could hop on the next building and perhaps get down on the next street, but that was dangerous. Still, she glanced down at the men gathered beneath her. Naptunie took a deep breath, deciding in a split moment. Better to try her luck on the next roof than down there!

"Up there!"

She froze right after the first step. Too late. The men had spotted her. While Darsan was too far away for them to fight, poor isolated Nana was the perfect target. She grimaced.

"Oh no..."

"Get her!"

The men began to climb, faster than her, and Nana retreated as fast as she could with an irrepressible panicked scream.

She only had seconds before they got to her! If they killed her before she could put her plan to work, she'd regret it forever! In her hurry, she tripped and fell down on her hands and knees, making her cry out in pain again.

"Grab that little b—"

"DON'T. TOUCH. MY. NANA!"

Naptunie heard the loudest noise, and looked down just in time to see a body flying in the opposite direction. She had no idea how Darsan had possibly come back so fast, but the young Prince was there and absolutely furious. He seemed to have almost doubled in size, and was reducing those men to pieces with impossible violence. It was all over in seconds, but the bloodbath made Nana grimace and look away.

"Are you alright?! Nana! Are you hurt? I'm so sorry!"

"I-I'm coming down!"

"I got you!"

Nana took a deep breath and slid down the roof, landing very softly in Darsan's arms. He greeted her with his big smile back on his face.

"Got you!" he said, visibly satisfied. "Are you alright? Did they hurt you?"

"N-no, I'm good..."

"Don't worry, I'm not letting them touch a hair on you!" he exclaimed.

"A-alright..."

"You're totally safe with me!"

"I see, but—"

"Don't worry, no one can beat me! I mean, perhaps my dad and my bro, but—"

"Darsan!" she exclaimed. "...Can you put me down now? ...Please?"

"Oh."

Darsan finally let her down with an embarrassed smile. Nana tried to replicate his smile, but there was fresh blood on

his cheek, and she couldn't get over that, her eyes naturally going there. She took a deep breath and glanced to the side. The

men he had been fighting earlier were obviously waiting for him to come back, but in no hurry to resume the fight... or, more

accurately, the massacre. Nana sighed and quickly grabbed the bottom of her skirt, ripping off a piece of fabric. Then, while

Darsan was still surprised by that, she suddenly began wiping his cheek with a determined expression.

"Listen," she said. "We need to make the smoke from the fire stronger. Not more fires, just the smoke. Those men aren't

immune to the smoke like you, so if it gets worse than this, they will naturally be at a loss, like the civilians. We can trap them

here, in the plaza, with you and Prince Kassian to fight them, but we need to prevent them from spreading to the other streets.

...You understand?"

"More kicking asses, smoke, blocking the nearby streets. Got it! ...But if you don't want me to cause more fire, what do

you want me to do then?"

"Just keep fighting! The nearby streets are already blocked with the fires, collapsed buildings, or smoke, but if I can

find a way to get across and control the fires on the other side, we can make sure no more Yekara flee to the streets, and you

and Prince Kassian and Tessandra only need to finish them off here!"

"That would be good?" Darsan asked.

"That would be a decent plan, I think."

"Alright. So... you just need to get to Tessandra, right?"

"Yes?" asked Neptunie, a bit confused.

"Got it. Come on!"

Before Neptunie could protest, Darsan suddenly helped her get back to the roof. She wondered if he only meant to help

her get across or have her stay safe, but to her surprise, he climbed up with her, standing next to her once they found themselves

on top of the roof.

"Where's Tessa?"

"O-over there," said Neptunie, pointing in her direction.

"Oh, easy!"

"Easy?"

"Okay, cross your arms. Chin down."

Naptunie obeyed by mere reflex, but before she could say a word, she suddenly felt Darsan grab her, her feet lifted off the ground, and the very next second, her body was thrown toward the sky. Her terrified scream echoed above the battlefield, which moved quickly under her. She saw hundreds of eyes looking up at her, all with the same dumbfounded expression. She vaguely heard another voice shouting and, way too quickly, she found herself descending way too fast in Tessandra's direction. Nana screamed again. The young woman lifted her eyes, opened them wide in shock, and dropped her weapons just in time to open her arms and receive her. The shock was violent, but somehow, Tessandra managed to catch her and they only stumbled a couple of steps back. "Holy dragon shit, Nana! What the actual fuck?!" Nana didn't even have the voice to answer. She was still trembling and, when Tessandra let go, she fell down to her knees, all her strength leaving her body. He had just sent her flying across the battlefield!

"Darsan, you crazy fuck!" Tessandra shouted. "Wait until this is over, I'm going to fucking kill you! Are you alright, Nana? Do you need to throw up? I'm so sorry..."

"I... I... He just..."

"Yep. That's Darsan for you. I'm sorry, he used to play that with his little brothers, I don't think he realized you're not exactly made for that kind of game..."

A game? That was as fun as a game for him?! Naptunie tried to keep herself from crying and, with Tessandra's help, she got back on her feet, just in time when her brother appeared next to her.

"You stopped them," said Sabael, looking out of breath. "Good job, sis."

"Why did that dumbass send you here?" asked Tessandra. "Please tell me there was an actual reason, or else I swear I'm going to murder him."

"Y-yes," nodded poor Nana. "I-I have a plan..."

"Oh, thank the gods. What is it? Don't worry, I promise I'm going to kick his ass and tell him to never do that again..."

While trying to catch her breath and get back to a normal heart rate, Naptunie quickly explained her plan to Tessandra, who nodded all along. They glanced around at their side of the battlefield, agreeing to her plan.

"That's a good plan, Nana. Leave me and the boys to it, you and Sabael can work on the side to create more smoke and make sure the Yekara who escape this area are either captured or forced back here. Darsan, Kassian, and I will have no problem if those guys are hindered by the smoke, we may even be able to force them to give up."

"I doubt that," said Sabael, "but I agree, that's a good plan."

"Where is Lady Bastat?" Nana asked. "I thought we could ask her for some fabrics to create large fans and direct the smoke..."

"She's injured, so she was sent to the back, but we can ask the Sehsan, I doubt they will refuse," explained Tessandra.

"They are two streets down, trying to coordinate everything with your tribe. We need to get things over with here soon, though,

I heard it's getting ugly up there, and I'm itching to check in on Cessilia too."

Just as she said that, a loud dragon growl echoed far above them. They turned their eyes toward the castle, where Jinn's

red body was furiously attacking one of the towers. It had destroyed half of the brick walls, leaving only a bit standing. Nana's

face got paler again, imagining Cessilia up there facing a dragon. Next to her,

Tessandra was squinting her eyes even more,

surprised by something she thought she had seen. A silver streak. It was very small and faint, but she was almost sure she had seen it.

"Cessi..."

"Come on, Nana," said Sabael. "We should get moving as fast as we can!"

"Go," nodded Tessandra.

Giving her one last look, Naptunie quickly left the area, running after her older brother.

Tessandra got down on one

knee to grab her swords, the blood already washed away from the blades by the rain.

But just as her fingers grazed the ground,

she felt something. She froze. It was extremely subtle, but she felt a very faint shake coming from the ground. A second one,

shortly after. Her fingers tightened up around the handles. ...An earthquake? She slowly stood up, listening. The sea was streets

away from here, but she could hear it raging furiously. The waves crashing against the island were somehow getting... louder. It

was abnormally strong. Tessandra began to breathe more heavily, sensing something was coming. It was as if the battlefield

around her had been reduced to a silent, slow background, while all of her senses and instincts were focused on a bigger

danger. She glanced up at the sky, only catching dark clouds and at times, blinding lightning bolts. Still, she couldn't shake that

feeling. Trying to ignore it, and feeling the enemies gathering around her again, she raised her arms, preparing to resume the

fight. She noticed how her hair was standing up under the armor's leather.

Suddenly, she heard it. Forgetting all about the fight, Tessandra turned around, her heart beating like crazy. She hadn't

dreamed that too, had she? Her eyes fixated on the skies, on the horizon, she waited, restless. She heard it again.

This time, she turned to Kassian, yards away from her, as if to confirm she wasn't crazy. She wasn't going crazy. The

Prince had stopped fighting too, with the same shocked, torn expression. He had heard it too.

Chapter 28

Back in one of the castle's highest towers, Cessilia's fierce fight against Jisel and her Red Dragon had gotten more violent, more... beastly. Combined with the Princess' new appearance, she was also seemingly much stronger.

The young Red Dragon kept pouncing on her like a cat trying to kill a rat, but she just wasn't letting herself be killed.

Cessilia was moving fast, like a dragon, slithering through the attacks, fighting back as if her opponent wasn't a furious creature

three times her size. The claws kept digging through the stone, wrecking what was once a gorgeous banquet hall, now reduced

to two walls and a large mountain of rubble. As most of the roof had been brought down, a lot of the rain was pouring in,

making the whole floor quite easy to slip on when it wasn't unstable from all the debris scattered around. Each time Cessilia

found herself against a wall, she had to watch just as much for the dragon as she did for the falling of broken bricks. Still, she

wasn't retreating from this fight. Her new, shining silver scales were glowing like a light in the darkness, beautiful and eerie on

her skin. She had taken off most of her armor and her Dragon Blood was now taking over in making her skin thicker, tougher.

The external injuries were closing up and healing at an incredible speed, but she could still feel the vivid pain inside. Her

organs weren't as quick to heal as her skin was, so she couldn't move at her full speed, but she sure was trying.

Jinn had to find ways to relentlessly attack her while also finding a precarious equilibrium on the tower the rest of its

body was gradually ruining. This banquet hall was absolutely not the right size to welcome one whole dragon, even a young

one, and the Red Dragon was just destroying everything mindlessly. Cessilia wouldn't have cared less about Jinn destroying

the whole tower, if it wasn't for the fact that she was still in it and feeling the tower getting less and less stable. Somehow, the

dragon's lower body also kept scratching the lower floors as it tried to climb, and all the jumping and scratching was causing

the whole building to become off-balance, weakening it. The more she fought, ran, and jumped to fight back against the unruly

dragon, the less stable she felt the ground under her. If she didn't finish this soon, chances were the whole tower would

collapse, and Dragon Blood couldn't save a crushed body...

The fighting itself was already hard enough as it was. Few men could have ever claimed to have fought a dragon alone,

and Cessilia was probably the only woman capable of doing so. She was fierce, grunting and groaning everytime she thrust

her sword. Her anger was on par with Jinn's furious growls, the two of them fighting like irate beasts wanting nothing more than to rip each other apart. The large claws got very close to her many times, sometimes ripping the floor and digging several inches into the stone right next to her legs. Every time Jinn pounced on her, Cessilia would retaliate by slicing the dragon or piercing it. Her sword was hanging on just fine, and as it was made of dragon claw, it could pierce the Red Dragon's skin while making big holes, not just a clean cut like a normal blade would have. Even if it wasn't always as deep and large as she had hoped, bit by bit, more and more injuries were appearing on Jinn's body. The dragon was getting madder each time, trying to kill her even more vehemently, forcing Cessilia to be on the move always. She couldn't get a single second of rest, aside from the very few times she managed to jump away or run to the opposite side. She could barely catch her breath and wipe the sweat and rain off her face before she had to get moving again. It was a dance of death, in which whoever slowed down saw their blood shed.

Her hair was drenched, and she had ripped apart the hem of her dress that hindered her already. There wasn't much left of the original outfit, leaving Cessilia covered only by some purple armor and her silver-magenta scales more than the dark brown pieces of fabric. It was better for her though as it made her movements easier, and she needed any mobility she could get. The rain was dripping down her whole body, soaking the ground and slowly transforming the floor of the former hall into a water rink. Despite how fast she moved and how careful she was, Cessilia slid several times against the wet stone, almost impaling herself on the dragon's fangs a couple of times. She was only glad her Dragon Blood was more fired up than ever. The piles of debris would have ruined her feet and legs with multiple scratches if they weren't already covered in scales.

There were few portions of the hall left that weren't covered by broken stones and debris, and she had to navigate through the mess while fighting a dragon that couldn't have cared less. Jinn had no issues climbing over the hills of broken walls to jump on her, fangs first, and try to bite her head or arm off. Cessilia had to run, dive behind whatever obstacle she could find between her and the dragon and find the first occasion to retaliate. Despite being at a clear disadvantage, the Princess was unrelenting, and not giving the beast an easy fight. Cessilia was stronger, fiercer than ever, and didn't back down, even when she was injured again. It happened after she had tripped once more and almost ripped her foot open on some sharp piece of

metal. She fell down to the side, and immediately rolled on the ground to avoid being impaled by one of Jinn's sharp claws by less than an inch.

When she jumped back on her feet, out of breath but sword ready, her entire right flank was bleeding out, covered in many little and middle-sized cuts. Immediately, the fresh wounds were quickly covered by a new shimmer of silver scales, her skin fighting the injuries with her as fast as the eye could see. The more that fight continued, the less human she looked. Silver scales were now covering more than half of her visible skin, and at each bolt of lightning that enlightened the sky, her scales shimmered too.

"Just get rid of her already!" shouted Jisel, furious. "Just kill her!"

Cessilia wasn't going to let herself be killed, not so easily. That measly dragon didn't scare her one bit, and she refused to lose against Jisel. Every time she had to jump to avoid the dragon's attack, she made sure to keep an eye on that woman.

Cessilia could forgive the dragon, perhaps, but she wasn't going to let Jisel get away with it twice. That woman had chosen her path, now it was time she paid for it.

"...Just come out and fight me yourself then!" she grunted, raising her sword again.

Jinn furiously growled, and Cessilia saw the dragon take a large, deep breath that couldn't mean anything good. She ran to hide behind a pile of wreckage and covered her head seconds before the large, hot flames burst out. The heat rose in a blink, and Cessilia felt the flames lick her arms, her legs, and everything around. The dragon's furious fiery breath lasted for just a few terrifying seconds. Although her body had some immunity to it thanks to the Dragon Blood, she knew a dragon's fire was

too powerful. She tried to endure it, feeling her silver scales rush to heal as fast as they got burned, trying to keep her alive despite the cataclysmic fire directed against her. Cessilia tried to protect her face, but she felt every part of her body itching, burning terribly. It was only a matter of seconds, but those seconds felt way too long. When it finally stopped, she was still way

too hot, and she could smell burnt flesh. She looked at her limbs, relieved to see several thick layers of scales had appeared to

protect the exposed parts. Then, she smelled flames still burning, and realized some of her hair had caught fire. Without

hesitation, Cessilia grabbed the locks and cut it off. Some of her hair was now cut to neck length, but she didn't have the time to wonder how it looked. She immediately began running, ignoring the pain still stinging her forearm and legs, and jumped, aiming for Jinn's back.

Cessilia knew dragons spitting fire had to take a few seconds to calm down, and she had to use that time. She violently

stabbed her whole sword through the dragon's left flank, and half a second later, Jinn's furious growl thundered. Disoriented by the pain that pierced its flesh, the Red Dragon writhed erratically, more violent than ever. It sent Cessilia flying off of its back, separating her from the sword still planted in its back. She felt herself hit the ground violently one second before Jisel's scream echoed her dragons. Cessilia grimaced. With the speed and violence she had landed, even if the floor had been cleared of debris, it would have been painful, but now, she could feel several parts of her body in a tremendous amount of pain. Luckily, she wasn't the only one. Still panicked by the weapon planted in its back, Jinn kept squirming and groaning, the Red Dragon going into a complete frenzy. The crazy rampage was just about destroying anything left in the room, spilling debris everywhere and collapsing the remaining walls. Still lying on her stomach, Cessilia tried to raise her head with a groan of pain, her green eyes immediately falling on the doors leading to the lower floors which had miraculously kept standing until then. If she entertained any dream of escaping this way, they were brutally crushed. In its madness, Jinn wrecked them, and the wall collapsed on it, along with whatever was left behind. Cessilia let out an annoyed groan. Now she was truly trapped here, unless the rest of the tower collapsed... which didn't seem impossible. Jinn's rampage hadn't just damaged the remaining walls, the floor was now literally swaying under them. Cessilia's heart dropped to her stomach as she felt the tower tilt more and more. By reflex, she grabbed the first hole she could find in the ground, and held on, hoping this would stop soon. Sadly, it wasn't. She heard a terrible sound somewhere beneath, something akin to a landslide or an earthquake, and the ground under her kept tilting and tilting. She could feel her body getting pushed toward the edge, leaning dangerously to the side that was collapsing. If she let go, just for a second, her body would inevitably slide down and fall off of the tower... She closed her eyes, trying to calm her crazy heartbeat and the blood pulsing in her head. She didn't even want to think about whether the sea or the rest of the castle was waiting below. All the Dragon Blood in the world wouldn't be able to save her from such a fall.

"Ha!"

Cessilia forced herself to look in the opposite direction. Annoyed, she saw Jisel, holding on to her dragon herself and, with her free hand, wielding Cessilia's dragon claw sword she had left in the wound. She had visibly ripped it out, waving around the blood-soaked weapon while her dragon had calmed down a bit. Jinn was still furiously growling, its wound bleeding out and the red body squirming still, arched as an indication of its suffering.

"What is it, Princess? Can't keep up after all?" she mocked her.

"Stop it, Jisel!" Cessilia shouted back. "Both you and your dragon are going to die! If you stop now, we might spare you!"

"Shut up! Look at you, Princess, you're about to die! And you want me to beg for mercy? Fuck no! I have come this far by bowing to everyone, and now, I have a Dragon Princess groveling under me! I'm going to watch you die, and then I'll show Ashen how he picked the wrong, weak woman!"

"I'm not weak," grunted Cessilia.

She used the strength in her arms and tried to pull herself up, working her muscles all she could to win just a few inches up. The tower was leaning so badly, it was even impressive it was still standing. The top of the building could just collapse at any moment, and Cessilia could hear the stones slowly creaking and about to crumble underneath. She could only use the strength of her arms to hold on, painfully. Steps away and somehow above her, Jisel was holding on to her dragon, ready to jump on and fly off the second the tower finally collapsed. Cessilia glared at her. She refused to not finish this fight.

"A fitting end for a coward princess," scoffed Jisel, getting more brazen from her position. "You'll die alone, a defeat fitting for the pathetic excuse of a War God's daughter!"

Cessilia's green eyes glared even more furiously. Almost all of her skin was covered in blood and silver scales by

now, and only the two green gems could be seen in the midst of her wet hair stuck to her face. Despite her position, her body

almost completely hanging above the ground, there wasn't an ounce of fear in them.

Far, far below, she could hear the clamor of the men fighting, the terrible sounds of a war that was spreading throughout

the island. The thunder was beating like drums above them as if to give rhythm to the ongoing battles. But even louder were the

waves crashing against the rocks below. Cessilia frowned and glanced down. The sea sounded almost as furious as the roaring

sky. Ignoring Jisel, she listened some more, something suddenly pulling her attention. A sound, something familiar yet foreign,

coming like a muted echo. Her heartbeat accelerated again. Her blood rushed through her veins, and an excited chill went

down her spine. She could hear it. Below the furious roars of the raging sea, far past the edges of the island. Lightning struck

the sky again and when Jisel looked down at Cessilia, prepared to see her give up or beg for help, she was shocked to find the Princess smiling.

"I'm no coward, Jisel. You are."

Then, she suddenly let go. Silence dropped on the area, and Jisel watched the Princess' body fall off of the tower,

almost in slow motion. Cessilia fell backwards, facing the sky and her eyes locked on Jisel with a scary satisfied expression. Snapped up by the void underneath, her body floated in the air, in a cross, and she slowly closed her eyes, disappearing in the shadows of the building, toward the seething sea. That's the precise moment the building chose to collapse. In a crescendo of rock breaking sounds, it slowly fell apart, collapsing in parts and taking the floors below down with it. Jisel only had time to hop on to her dragon as Jinn flapped its small wings to get above the wreckage. She watched an entire portion of the castle fall below them into large clouds of dust. Some parts violently hit and damaged other parts of the castle, but most fell into the surrounding sea, disappearing into the waves. Jisel didn't care at all for the tower. Her eyes were relentlessly looking for one woman's silhouette. It made no sense that she would have survived this. Not only because a fall from such a height should have killed her, but even if she somehow survived, the collapsing bricks and stones should have buried her in the waves. No one could survive that. ...So why did she have the feeling the Princess had survived anyway? She had clearly chosen to let go. What kind of madness had prompted that jump? Jisel kept looking through the waves, as the tower had finished collapsing, reduced to a shapeless mountain on one side of the castle. The sea was unusually restless too, as if it was preparing to grow and eat up the nearby islands. That Princess had to have drowned by now! Still, Jisel couldn't breathe properly, her anxiety soaring. Her eye caught something. Under the water. It was just a glimpse, out of the corner of her eye, but she was almost sure she had seen something shining... a shimmer of silver. A cold chill went down her spine, and she jumped in fright as the thunder suddenly boomed above. Then, she heard it very clearly. The high-pitched, almost metallic scream of a water dragon. Jisel opened her eyes wide, fear filling her expression. It couldn't be. She heard it again, even louder. It was as if it was coming from the entire sea below, the water acting like a fearsome echo chamber for a very large creature. She grabbed her dragon and prompted it to get away, quickly. Jinn was getting nervous too. Suddenly, a gigantic wave burst out of the sea, climbing high toward the sky. In the midst of it, a large creature suddenly soared, letting out that furious scream from before, even clearer and more piercing. A gigantic water dragon, with silver scales shimmering like diamonds, and furious, dark pink ruby eyes. The mythical creature extended its wings, flapping them like an icy cold mist whipping the air, and screamed again in fury, showing its snow white but sharp fangs. On the top of its head,

Cessilia was standing, the blood washed off her body, her scales the same color and her eyes cold as ice.

“...We’re not done, Jisel.”

She saw the other woman’s expression fall, very quickly, from shock to absolute terror.

Jisel grabbed her dragon’s

head, and pulled it to fly away as fast as it could and away from her. Cessilia glared at the fleeing figure of the Red Dragon, but

first, she got down on her knees, putting her hands on the Silver Dragon’s head.

“...I missed you so much, Cece,” she muttered in a cry. “Thank you for coming back...”

Her dragon answered with that unique, metallic scream unlike any other dragon. Cece wasn’t like any other dragon

anymore, and the Silver Dragon was absolutely magnificent. Its scales were like thousands of perfectly shaped jewels on its

body, shimmering everytime the light hit them. They were incredibly cold too, perhaps because Cece had emerged from the sea,

and they looked almost like ice gems under her fingers. Her dragon was three times bigger than Cessilia remembered, and its

wings too, were effortlessly flapping in the sky, grand and capable of keeping the large body flying without a problem. Cece

was effortlessly hanging in the sky like a silver cross visible from all sides of the Capital.

To Cessilia, though, nothing

mattered more than those gorgeous ruby eyes, staring right back at her. It was as if they had parted just yesterday. Despite the

new, grand appearance, it was still her Cece underneath, her dragon which she felt more connected to than ever.

From where she stood, it was difficult to spot, but Cessilia did notice the large, burgundy mark on her dragon’s throat.

It was one perfect line, almost like a collar, but to her, it had a terrible significance. As if, even if she had retrieved her dragon,

this scar was to stay as a reminder never to make the same mistake again. Cessilia sighed. She had no idea why Cece had come

back so different, but she could feel their bond stronger than before. Her dragon was stronger than before. Like the Sea Dragon

God of the legend, the Silver Dragon was flying above the sea with shining scales and an imposing presence. Cessilia could

almost feel the power in each movement, and she could feel, deep inside, Cece’s strength adding to hers. They were one, once

again. Her dragon flapped its gorgeous wings, taking a more horizontal position, and she sat on its nape.

It didn’t take long to find Jinn; the Red Dragon’s figure was standing out against the dark gray and blue background of

the raging sea and thundering storm above them. Cece let out another unique high-pitched growl, and jumped down in that

direction. Either Jinn felt the other dragon coming or was trying to flee anyway, but both dragons accelerated, and the hunt

quickly began in the sky.

It was a furious race against one another. Cessilia had to hang on to her dragon or, at the speed Cece was going, she'd be violently thrown off. Still, she kept both eyes open and fixed right ahead at Jisel and her Red Dragon. Unlike them, the connection between those two was obviously off. In fact, whenever Cece got close enough, Cessilia could hear Jisel's furious screams, and see the fear in Jinn's eyes. The Red Dragon was just terrified. Cece was much, much bigger and in a predatory position too. Claws out, if the Silver Dragon got close enough, no doubt blood would soon flow. As young of a dragon as Jinn was, its goal was most likely to survive and protect Jisel too. Sadly, that woman looked beyond mad now. Something seemed to have snapped in her, enough for her to curse at her dragon that was fleeing this fight. Either she truly believed they had a chance, or she just refused to back down, she was just vociferating at Cessilia and Cece, shouting for Jinn to turn around and fight. That wouldn't happen as long as the Red Dragon was in its right mind. "Get them, Cece."

Her dragon let out another long scream in the sky and accelerated again. The two water dragons' bodies seemed to be dancing in the sky now, their wings flapping at a quick speed to try and hunt or flee the other. They didn't hesitate to dash through the thick, humid clouds, or fly low to the Capital's rocks. It was a terrifying game of hunt, or even hide-and-seek. Every time Jinn tried to find a place to hide, to cover itself, Cece would inevitably appear, with those ruby eyes glowing in anger. The Silver Dragon was now mimicking its mistress' wrath, and just wouldn't stop until it got its prey. The two of them flew in between the bridges, and even dived into the sea. Perhaps Jinn had hoped to swim faster than Cece, but it turned out to be another mistake. In fact, with its wings closed and its body slithering quickly, Cessilia's dragon was even faster as a swimmer. The raging waves were no problem, and the dragons brutally clashed for the first time underwater.

The impact was violent. Cessilia had just enough time to take a deep breath in, and when her dragon suddenly attacked Jinn, she almost breathed it out from the sudden impact. A thick trail of blood appeared in the water. Cece was like a snake, trying to use that long silver body to corner Jinn and find the first opportunity to violently bite. The Red Dragon growled furiously and fought back, unwilling to admit defeat. The violent exchange ensued for several seconds but soon, Jinn somehow managed to get away, and Cece swam back to the surface so Cessilia could breathe. When they breached the surface, the Princess took a deep breath in, grateful. Holding her breath so long underwater

sure was different when she had to hold on to a rowdy dragon at the same time... She pushed her hair back, suddenly remembering it was half-cut.

"Let's go up," she said.

Cece immediately obeyed and flew up again, away from the waves. Jinn wasn't in sight anymore, but the duo couldn't have gone far. All their surroundings were in view, and Cessilia suspected they had found a temporary hideout. Pulling on her dragon to direct its movements, she got Cece to fly above the rest of the Capital. She looked for her allies at the same time as they searched for Jinn. She spotted the two distinct battlefields and, a bit more worrying, the numerous fires that were spreading across the Capital. Ashen's home was bleeding out... Luckily, it looked like the situation was tilting to their side.

Downtown, a large but ravaged battlefield was clearly more dominated by the locals than the Yekara colors. Cessilia even recognized her brothers, and Tessandra, all three of them absorbed in their fighting, but still raising their heads when they saw her or heard Cece. She was too high to see their expressions, but she was glad they all seemed fine... Moreover, her dragon was still focused on its prey, and barely glanced down toward the humans fighting below. With another impatient and irritated growl, Cece did a new loop around the Capital. Feeling her dragon's impatience, Cessilia was looking all around too. It was quite nerve-wracking. The difference in size between the two dragons was huge, but if Jinn found a way to hide, this hunt could potentially last a while, and that was the opposite of what Cessilia wanted. She wanted to end this fight soon and return to Ashen's side to check on him. That whole battle against Jisel had lasted too long already.

Suddenly, a furious growl came from behind and above them. Cessilia felt the sudden wind blowing from behind, and

turned around just in time to see Jinn jumping on them, all claws out.

Cece didn't have time to turn around, but Cessilia did. Without hesitation, she grabbed her smaller blade and plunged it into the Red Dragon's incoming paw, impaling it to the hilt. Jinn let out a furious growl of pain, but not without managing to scratch Cece with its other paw. However, the Silver Dragon wouldn't have it. Furious, Cece turned around and violently bit back, its fangs crushing Jinn's front paw in one bite.

"My dragon!" shouted Jisel, furious.

"If you're sorry for him, come and fight yourself!" retorted Cessilia.

She pulled back the blade, the only weapon she had left, and violently kicked the Red Dragon's snout before it could

even think of trying to bite her. Jinn growled and tried to retreat, but Cece wouldn't let go of its limb. Dragon blood suddenly

rained down as the two intertwined dragons battled one another furiously, one trying to get away, the other refusing to let go. It had become a chaotic mess of scales and blood flying, ferocious growls and dragon screams. Cessilia tried to run down the dragon's back to get to Jisel, but everytime she moved, the two dragons changed positions again, making her lose her balance. She could only hold on to Cece every time, or risk being thrown off. Jisel, on the other hand, had barely moved, if not to retreat away from Cece's fangs now digging into her poor dragon's shoulder. By now, it had bitten down on more than enough of the Red Dragon's flesh, and they could hear the sounds of bones being crushed under the pressure. Cessilia couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for Jinn's suffering.

"Cece!" she shouted.

Her dragon grunted, and brutally ripped off that foreleg. Cece spat it out while the injured Jinn was retreating, completely terrified, its limbless shoulder pouring thick dragon blood into the river. Cece let out another long scream, and flew back to face Jinn, showing off its still blood-stained fangs.

"Get the hell down from that dragon, Jisel," Cessilia said, "or I'll have to kill him too."

Jisel's horrified eyes were on the dragon's injury. If she felt sorry for Jinn, she also looked more worried for herself,

and how her dragon looked like it wouldn't be able to defend her for much longer.

"You wish!" she screamed. "This dragon is mine! He's mine and he will defend me even if he has to die doing it! That's

the only thing he's worthy of! That's the only reason I kept him!"

Cessilia glared at her. She could see Jisel's survival instincts building up in a horrible manner. That was the look of a

woman absolutely terrified by the mere idea of her death. She wouldn't give up, ever.

The only way of life she knew was to

survive, at absolutely any cost. She would lie, run, hide, cheat all she could rather than give up or die. Even if she had to

sacrifice a loyal dragon in the process. Cessilia took a deep breath, and slowly, put her open palm against Cece's cold body.

She could feel all of her dragon's emotions like her own... Impatience, frustration, stubbornness, resolve. The rage built up

from the adrenaline of the fight. Anger, and that strong desire to protect Cessilia too.

The disgust of the taste of dragon blood...

Cece was sick of this fight too.

"...We need to separate those two," muttered Cessilia.

Her dragon growled in agreement. Cece was mad at that brat that refused to submit and kept running away. Dragons

weren't meant to run away or avoid fights. If it knew it were the weaker one, it should have simply conceded defeat, and this

would have all been over. This whole chasing and hunting of a peer was annoying, frustrating. Moreover, the dragon and its

mistress' anger were directed at the same person: that mad woman on the Red Dragon's back. Cece was mirroring Cessilia's anger toward her, and her conflicted feelings toward the unfortunate Red Dragon. The pair understood each other perfectly with just a few words and a touch.

Jisel then proceeded to have Jinn turn around and fly away again. Of course, the Red Dragon was trying to get as far away from Cece as possible and delay its inevitable demise. Cece didn't start the chase right away, but instead let out another long scream, and took some height above the fleeing Red Dragon. Jinn was considerably slowed down by the terrible injury. Its flying didn't look as precise as before, almost as if it was on the verge of collapse. It was flying lower and lower and, at the right moment, Cece dove. The Silver Dragon came down from the sky like another lightning bolt, and the hit was just as brutal.

Cessilia had to stick to her dragon's back for the impact, and even like this, she was brutally ejected. Luckily, her body landed on the sand, right below them. Irony had it that they were back on the beach where she and her brothers had let Jisel live once before. The tide had already washed away all traces of the previous fight, and the sand was wet under their feet. Cessilia felt the waves caress her ankles as she quickly jumped back on her feet.

She heard the screams of two dragons fighting, and the waves of sand violently thrown in all directions. The fight was incredibly brutal, with their bodies rolling in the sand, silver and red scales mixed at such a speed, she could barely see who was on top. From her dragon's angry growls, Cessilia could tell hers was mad and frustrated, but not in pain. Jinn was desperately trying to survive the attacks, and Cece was trying not to kill. It was absolute chaos, but in the midst of this, there was no way Jisel was still on her dragon's back. Cessilia looked around and spotted her on all fours in the sand, yards away from her, almost on the other end of the beach. She must have been hurt from the fall, seeing how that woman struggled to get back up. As soon as her eyes met Cessilia's, though, she found the strength to stand up again and run. This time, she couldn't fly away, and she was cornered on the beach. Only the distance and the two dragons fighting between them kept Cessilia away from her.

"...Ah," Cessilia heard her laugh. "You're too weak, Princess! Too weak to kill another dragon, aren't you?! Look! Jinn

will fight for me to the end, and you'll let him kill your dragon because you're so weak!"

"...No," Cessilia muttered. "Not again."

She turned her green gaze to the two dragons. As if they had heard the two women, the two of them separated, still

furiously growling at each other, but putting a bit of a distance between one another. Even if they didn't finish, Cece was the clear winner. The Silver Dragon only had a few bite marks bleeding on random spots of its body, and a slight limp in its rear paw, but that was it. Jinn, on the other end, was in a pitiful state. On top of its ripped off limb, the Red Dragon was also now missing a large portion of its left wing and eye, and had deep lacerations all over. The red of its blood was transforming its scales into a darker red shade, and staining the sand beneath. Upon seeing Cece retreat, it kept growling, slowly retreating toward Jisel with a defensive stance. Meanwhile, Cece's silver body curled up around Cessilia, still letting out furious warning growls right back at Jinn. However, the Silver Water Dragon was obediently standing behind its mistress, leaving her the space to walk up closer to Jinn. The Red Dragon didn't seem much more enthusiastic to face the woman. It kept retreating, looking like it didn't know which one of the pair to growl at. Cessilia kept marching toward the dragon, a bit exhausted by all the fighting, her arms sore from hanging on to Cece so tightly, but incredibly calm and composed. In fact, her glowing green eyes were somewhat scaring Jinn more than her dragon counterpart. The closer she came, the more the Red Dragon felt the need to retreat and growl. It was obvious its goal was still to protect Jisel somehow, but fear was dominating in its eyes. "That woman doesn't deserve to have a dragon," Cessilia muttered, addressing the dragon itself. "You don't decide that!" shouted Jisel. "This dragon only survived thanks to me! I'm the reason Jinn is alive, and he has to protect me, like my brother should have! He'll die for me if he has to!" "No," Cessilia muttered. She walked even closer, and this time, Jinn's growling turned more serious, the dragon taking a step toward her, getting ready to fight her again if needed. Behind Cessilia, Cece kept growling in warning too, but the Silver Dragon didn't move to defend its mistress. Cessilia suddenly got within range, and Jinn attacked. The Red Dragon jumped on her, its claws missing her by a bit as she jumped to the side. With one of its legs missing, its landing completely failed, and it rolled on its injured shoulder, making the dragon scream in pain. "...No dragon should have to die for its owner." Suddenly, Cessilia stood back up, and took a deep breath in. Jinn tried to jump back on its feet, fangs out and ready to bite, but before it did, Cessilia suddenly blew out a gigantic blast of snow and ice.

The Red Dragon was violently swept back, its body hitting the external wall of the cave, and it stopped there, lying on the ground. Cessilia slowly turned to a speechless Jisel and, in an attempt to protect its owner once more, Jinn pitifully tried to stand up. That's when Cece jumped in, and just like Cessilia, suddenly blew an impressive amount of snow and ice on the Red Dragon. Except, it was much bigger and more powerful, and soon, most of Jinn's body was trapped in large blocks of ice. Meanwhile, Cessilia took out her dagger and calmly approached Jisel, who was still stunned, her eyes on her dragon. She shook her head frantically, and fell back, not even trying to run. "Th-that can't be," she muttered, sobbing. "That's not a water d-dragon. It can't be... a... a..."
"...An Ice Dragon."

Chapter 29

Jisel's expression changed to one of pure fear. Whatever was going on, she couldn't accept it. She wasn't ready for that. Her eyes went back to Cessilia, suddenly switching to anger.

"...He'll betray you too," she hissed. "You can't trust men. They will always find a younger, prettier woman to chase instead of you. Just you wait. He'll throw you away!"

"I'm not scared of Ashen changing his mind," Cessilia retorted calmly. "Even if he betrays me, I'll take it, and move on.

You're the one who thinks we can't advance without a man in this world. But you're wrong. I've learned my lesson already.

With or without a man by my side, I'll be fine."

"You... You wench!" shouted Jisel, still backing away, half-crying now. "You took it all from me!"

"You're the one who doesn't know how to let go. You didn't even love Ashen, yet you held on desperately. You could have stayed out of this conflict, but you chose to ally with the Yekara, Jisel. I thought you were a smart woman, but the truth is, you're the real coward here."

"Am I?" she scoffed.

Her eyes went down on the dagger Cessilia was holding. She was still hesitating, just a bit. She wasn't afraid to kill

anymore, but Jisel... Somehow, she was reluctant to kill her. Not because of her relationship with Ashen, or because of their

history. No, Cessilia had a feeling that, in other circumstances, with another path in life, that woman would have turned out

very differently. In some way, Jisel was just another victim who had turned to the worst means to survive. They even had blood

in common... She was a dragon's daughter too. Something in Cessilia's heart held her hand, wondering if there was really

nothing that could be done. Of course, Jisel had already gone too far to redeem herself, and she knew it was too late for that

woman to change... or was it?

To her surprise, Jisel slowly stood up. She didn't have any weapons anymore, and no will to fight left. Cessilia didn't

feel any danger coming from that woman... She had given up, yet a mocking smirk was on her lips.

"Are you really stronger than I am, Princess?" she said, strangely calmly. "...If your precious King betrays you, do you really think you can ever take it?"

"I can take it," Cessilia retorted without blinking.

Jisel smiled, and stepped closer to her.

"There have been so many like me," she muttered. "Desperate women, willing to do anything to survive. Women with no dragons to help them..."

She finally got very close to Cessilia, and touched her hand that was holding the dagger, strangely gentle. Cessilia held

her weapon tighter, just in case Jisel would try to take it, or turn it against her, but it didn't feel that way.

"If you want to help them, you should be ready to do this."

She suddenly pulled her fist, and brutally impaled herself on the dagger.

Shocked, Cessilia stared at Jisel's eyes, and the strange smile that appeared on her lips. The two women exchanged a

stare for a long minute, and then, Jisel coughed some blood, and slowly fell back, her body dropping on the sand. Her eyes

half-closed, she had stopped moving, lying completely still and her head turned toward the crying Red Dragon. Cessilia was

shocked. She stared at Jisel's breathless figure, unable to comprehend why that woman had done that. She had been so

desperate to survive just a moment ago... Had she realized she had lost the moment her dragon was trapped? Or had she

already been badly injured during the fall? That would explain how her death had been so quick... or perhaps she had

purposely stabbed herself so she'd die quickly... Cessilia would maybe never understand why she had suddenly chosen this

end, or get answers to her questions. Either way, that woman was dead.

Cessilia dropped her dagger, a bit out of breath. She felt... strange. The body of the dead woman lying in front of her

didn't feel real. She didn't know what she should have expected, but strangely, she didn't really feel anything... Just tired,

maybe. The waves gently came up to their position, reaching Jisel's body. If she left her like that, her body would be swept

away soon. She would disappear in the sea, like many, perhaps. She could hear the long cries of the Red Dragon. Jinn's faint

squeals were heartbreaking to hear... Cessilia let out a faint sigh, a cold mist coming out of her lips. One fight she had finally

ended. It didn't feel like a victory, but it sure felt like closure.

A faint, more gentle growl came from behind her. Cessilia smiled, and turned to face Cece. The majestic Silver Dragon was standing there, with those big ruby eyes staring right at her. They faced each other on the beach, finally getting a moment to themselves. The thunder had stopped too. Now, all they could hear was the calm sea, the rain, and the cries of a mourning dragon. Cessilia slowly approached her dragon. Cece was so big now, she had to stand up to be at the same height as her dragon's eyes. Gently, she put her hands around her dragon's face, around what would be its cheeks. She smiled, and gently put her forehead against her cold scales. Cece released a little breath of cold mist too. Strangely, her dragon's coolness warmed Cessilia's heart, and brought her peace.

"...Did you come back because you were worried about me?" she muttered.

Cece growled faintly.

"Thank you... for giving me a second chance."

She stayed for a long moment like this, taking deep breaths with her. The cold, almost eerie white mist around her

dragon was making her feel safe, and calmed her down. She could feel her lungs fill with fresh air as some heavy burden was

lifted off her shoulders. With Cece there, she felt incredibly strong, serene and complete. Just like her dragon, she was different

from the young woman Cece had parted with, years ago. The two of them were more mature, stronger, fiercer, and more united

than ever. The two of them stood still for just a few minutes, as a quiet reunion.

After a while, Cessilia stepped back, her hands still on her dragon's cheeks.

"I think we have to go now. Sorry for bringing you back into such a mess."

Cece released a little spat out a mouthful of snow, and nudged Cessilia's face with her snout, making her smile.

"You're right. Let's go."

The two of them turned heads toward Jinn, who was still trying to fight the ice it was trapped in. Sadly for the Red

Dragon, Cece's thick ice wasn't going to melt anytime soon. It tried to move again, but Cece suddenly growled as a warning, making Jinn whimper and calm down.

"...We'll take care of him later," said Cessilia. "Let's go help the others now."

Cece turned around, and Cessilia quickly climbed on her dragon's back. When they took off, Cessilia couldn't help but

glance one last time at the beach, Jisel's body still lying there and getting smaller as Cece flew up. She sighed, and then turned

her eyes forward.

Her dragon knew exactly where to head first. Flying through the rain, Cece took her back to the Capital's streets, flying

above the main place of conflict. Just like Krai or Kian, Cece was too big for the narrow alleys of the island, so Cessilia

jumped down, landing on a roof and sliding down until she hit the street. She had been dropped just streets away from the main battle, but the number of fires going on in the area was worrying her; the alleys were filled with dark smoke, ashes, and people fleeing. Some recognized her, and tried to run to her to beg for help, but Cessilia knew she had to keep going. Apologizing when she could, she kept running, trying to find her cousin's figure she had spotted from above.

"Tessa!"

"Cessi!"

As soon as she heard her, her cousin stopped her fight and turned around, and the two of them ran to each other. The two women jumped into each other's arms, relieved.

"You're good!" exclaimed Tessandra. "Damn, I was starting to get real worried... Is that Cece up there?!"

"It is," smiled Cessilia. "She's back."

"She's back and with a massive upgrade, you mean! What the heck did she eat to get that big? And... is it just me or has she changed color too?"

"Just a bit," Cessilia chuckled.

"What about... up there?" muttered Tessandra, glancing toward the castle.

"...I got it. I just wanted to check on you guys here first."

"If it wasn't for those fucking fires, it would be better. We've pretty much won the fight already, but putting out those fires is a bit more complicated than just kicking some asses. Don't worry, though, we got this. You go get your man, alright?"

"I will. But first..."

Cessilia glanced up at the sky, at her dragon, and Cece loudly screamed back. Then, the Silver Dragon did a beautiful arc in the sky, and dived down on the Capital. Right before it hit the building, it suddenly flapped its gigantic wings, and blew a long wave of ice and snow above the whole area. Everyone stopped, speechless, to witness the incredible white specks raining down on them. Not only had Cece blown an ice mist over the building, but the rain itself was cooled down, and came down in little snow crystals above the streets. Thanks to that, the fires were all almost immediately blown out and dampened, leaving smoke plumes everywhere. Tessandra's jaw dropped.

"What in the world was that?! You got a snow dragon now?!"

"An ice dragon."

"Ah," scoffed Tessandra. "Too cool to play the water dragon now, uh? Well, I'm glad our girl is back... and you too."

Cessilia smiled, and they hugged once more, quickly but strongly. Tessandra had noticed not only how her cousin wasn't stuttering anymore, but also how she was different. When they let go of each other, she put a hand on her hip, glancing

around.

"Well, thanks for the help with the fires, I think we'll manage things from here. You better go and save whatever's left of your man."

"Will you be alright?"

"Cessi, I've been having fun slicing guys in two for the last hour or so, shouting after your annoying brother, and spending time with my boyfriend too. Trust me, we're good here. Even Nana's turning into somewhat of a pyromaniac..."

"Nana?" frowned Cessilia, confused.

"Long story, but the family might get bigger quite soon... Anyways, I'll update you later. Don't worry about us, go!"

Cessilia nodded and, after one last glance, she turned around, headed for the highest roof she could find in the area. It

did seem like Tessandra and her brothers had a hold of the situation already. For some reason, it looked like they had gathered the Yekara soldiers and mercenaries in the middle of the plaza, and were subjugating the last ones resisting, or hunting them down in the streets.

Quickly reaching the rooftop, Cessilia jumped just in time to be grabbed by silver-scaled claws. Holding on to her

dragon, she quickly climbed all the way to Cece's back and sat to take a better look at the situation below. The streets were

still very animated with people either fighting, fleeing, or helping to put out the remaining fires. It seemed like the last fights

were now pretty scattered, and would die soon. As Cece flew higher, Cessilia saw beyond the Inner and Outer Walls. For

some reason, one of the bridges was gone, but Kian and Krai were still fiercely defending two of the three remaining, and the

last one was visibly under the citizens' control. In fact, she could see people going in and out, probably exchanging supplies or

carrying the injured to safer locations. She could bet the camp they had set up before was helping again, and she spotted what

she thought to be food distribution lines too. Someone had perhaps reused their ideas for the greater good...

As they got closer to the castle, Cessilia saw the plaza where they had freed Sabael and the others. To her surprise, she

spotted Kassian almost there, leading more men and regaining control of the area too.

Her brother looked busy, but he still

glanced up, and smiled at her when their eyes met. Cessilia smiled right back at him, a bit relieved to have him help out too.

How much more complicated would the situation have been, had her big brothers not shown up...? Still, the final battle was up

to Ashen and her.

Cece flew in circles around the castle. The tower Cessilia had fought Jinn in previously with the banquet hall was

completely gone and reduced to a mountain of bricks. In fact, a fifth of the castle had collapsed and been destroyed as a result.

Cessilia sighed, but luckily, it was most likely Yekara men who would have been killed in that disaster. Meanwhile, Cece kept flying, trying to find a point to drop Cessilia at. She didn't want to have to go back all the way from the bottom to the top, but her dragon quickly found the perfect spot. Ironically, it was the Cerulean Suite's balcony.

Cessilia jumped into the familiar place, now looking all dark and gloomy. She loved this room a lot, and was glad it

had somehow survived the castle's collapse. She turned around to face Cece.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine."

Her dragon screeched in response, and left, probably off to extinguish more fires and help wherever it would be

needed. Cessilia turned around, resolute, and began running. The castle had never felt so empty and cold. She only stopped to

grab some new weapons, having lost her dragon claw swords in the fight against Jinn.

She didn't expect any more dragon

enemies, though, and a set of short swords taken from a Yekara soldier would be enough to face whoever was left. Now that

her bond with Cece was re-established, Cessilia was even more unstoppable. She effortlessly fended off the few soldiers that

dared to stand in her way up the tower. The only thing she was worried about was Ashen. How long had passed since they had

split up? She was desperate to know if he was alright. She had left him alone against his adopted brother and Lord Yebekh. If

anything had happened to him...

As she kept climbing up, her worry grew exponentially for him. Jisel's words came back in her head. Would she really

be fine without him? And what would happen to this Kingdom if anything happened to Ashen? The questions hammered her

heart like a restless monster trying to bring her down. Still, Cessilia kept climbing. She couldn't even feel the injuries of her

previous fight against Jinn anymore. Her Dragon Blood was healing it all, as if getting ready for the next one. Her body was

still covered in scales, but that wouldn't be a problem if everything inside was healed just as well...

She finally reached the throne room and barged inside, opening the doors wide. She was shocked to find the room

covered in blood. A real carnage had happened there. Cessilia suddenly remembered she and Ashen had also fought more

soldiers before splitting up. Still, there was even more blood now, and fresher too. How could the two of them have... carried

out such a bloody fight? There was even blood high up on the walls! Her green eyes moved, and she saw, right in time, the

silver flash of a sword. Cessilia jumped without even needing to fight, blocking the blade right above Ashen.

Lord Yebekh's eyes grew wide in shock.

"...You!" he grunted.

"Me."

Cessilia kicked him in the torso, her incredible strength sending the man flying against the opposite wall. She heard him

grunt in pain, but she was already leaning down to check on Ashen.

"Ashen! Are you alright?"

"Yeah... not doing exactly great..."

His slow, hoarse voice said more than his actual words about his current state.

Cessilia's eyes went down on his body.

He was alive, but badly injured. The large red stain on his abdomen was most worrisome. He was lying down, covered in

blood and exhausted, but she had high hopes he could still survive if he was given the proper care soon... Cessilia glanced

back. His adopted brother's body was lying not too far from his. Unlike Ashen, that man was dead, for good.

"...Please tell me we're not doing this again," grunted Ashen.

Cessilia shook her head.

"No... He's gone for good."

"I see..."

Ashen didn't seem glad about his win, just relieved it was over. He had fought well, and the fight had probably been

more violent than what she could see. From the injuries on both men, Cessilia could tell they had fought like dragons despite

each having their own disadvantage.

"You wench!"

Cessilia glared over her shoulder. Yebekh was getting back on his feet, furious. He had probably expected an easy win

after leaving Ashen to fight his own brother. From the way he was completely unharmed, she could guess this rotten man had

likely just watched the fight, waiting for a winner to emerge to strike.

"I'm fed up with that bastard..." groaned Ashen, glaring at him too.

"...Don't worry, stay still," gently muttered Cessilia.

He frowned, probably confused by her lack of stutter, but Cessilia smiled, and put a quick kiss on his lips.

"I got this," she reassured him.

Leaving Ashen there, she then slowly stood up to face Yebekh in his stead.

"Ah!" scoffed the man. "What kind of King lets a woman fight in his stead?!"

"What kind of rotten piece of shit leaves a disabled man to fight in his?" Cessilia retorted.

Yebekh's expression dropped. That woman looked completely different from before.

She sounded different, colder,

angrier. He hadn't expected this. No, he hadn't expected her to come back at all! He had seen that tower collapse...

"It doesn't change a thing," he hissed. "This Kingdom is mine! I won't be stopped by a mere girl!"

"...We'll see about that."

"I'll admit I underestimated you, War God's daughter," said Yebekh. "I shouldn't have expected that half-blooded bitch to be able to take care of you."

Cessilia frowned slightly.

"What did you promise Jisel?"

"Oh, whatever that wench begged for. Either way, she knew this Kingdom would be mine. Once she knew our King was throwing her back onto the streets, she was only too happy to beg, like the whore she is!"

Cessilia's fingers tightened on her weapon, Ashen's sword she had taken from his side. She may not have liked Jisel,

but she hated that man ten times more. He was one of those truly terrible people whose wickedness could literally be read on

their face. He didn't feel an ounce of remorse for what he had done, or all the lives his cupidity had sacrificed. He hadn't even

wasted a drop of sweat while dozens of his men were dying outside! Cessilia glanced back at Ashen. Even lying on the ground

and injured, he still had the strength to glare at Yebekh. He probably couldn't move, and it was better he didn't. Not only

because of his wound bleeding heavily, but also because he was under the effects of a poison, and moving around would only

make it harder for his body to fight it. She had high hopes Ashen's body would manage to fight it off somehow, as he had some

tolerance to poison... From what she had seen, he was enduring well. Still, Cessilia wanted to get him out of here as fast as

possible. The sooner he received proper medical care, the greater his chances would be to survive this and fully heal.

"Are you worried for your King?" scoffed Yebekh. "That boy never had what it truly takes to be a ruler! He's too

young, too impetuous, too easily swayed by his emotions!"

"And you believe yourself to be any better?" Cessilia calmly retorted.

"Of course! See, it takes experience, strength, and some willpower to lead a nation. You're a young lady, so you may

not know, but while the population only bows to power, they have no idea of the real sacrifices that need to be made for a

proper leader to truly rule!"

"You've sacrificed a lot of people, and yet you'll never be King."

Her words made the man glare back, but Cessilia was still perfectly calm. Despite the age difference and that man's

arrogant tone, it seemed as if she was the one lecturing him. The two of them were facing each other, a few steps away from

one another, too far to begin fighting, but certainly getting ready for it. Cessilia wouldn't move away from her position

defending Ashen, but Yebekh had begun moving around, slowly pacing while spinning the tip of his sword against his finger, staring at her with a vicious expression.

"I have waited for far too long," he retorted. "I've let boys play with swords and pathetic men wield power, waiting for my time to come!"

"You're nothing but a cunning snake," Cessilia muttered. "You've only used people to fulfill your means, but your underhanded ways will never make you a king."

"Ha! And you think that brat is a better king, perhaps? He knows nothing!"

"He still makes a much better king than you," she retorted without batting an eye.

"Ashen is closer to the people than

you'll ever be. What kind of leader stays hidden in a tower while the rest of his men fight and bleed? What kind of man

sacrifices his own niece for power? You don't deserve to become King, Lord Yebekh.

Your clan might follow your orders, but the rest of this Kingdom never will."

"A child like you knows nothing! True power is leading your men to victory! The best leaders are the ones who do not

need to fight the war themselves to win! The survivors are the smartest, not the strongest! All I need is to claim the heirs have

died, and I am the most fitting King for this Kingdom! I have the men, the resources, and the money! I have an army that will

follow me, and those we can't get on our side, we will kill! The people of this Kingdom are powerless! They have no money

and no power to resist the Yekara Clan! My ancestors knew long ago that this land would come back to us one day! My clan is

one of the oldest here, Princess, and we have waited for centuries to get it back!"

"...Blind is the man who thinks reigning is all about owning a piece of land," chuckled Cessilia. "Your leadership

means absolutely nothing to the people of this Kingdom, Yebekh. They do not care for your schemes and underhanded ways. If

anything, you're probably the very last man they'd want to see on the throne."

The man glared at the abandoned throne behind him. Ashen's adopted brother's body was still there, just steps away

from the meaningful seat, and Yebekh's eyes naturally went to it. He scoffed.

"Ha! You think either of those brats would have made a better king? They know nothing about politics! They couldn't

even get their way with their father! At least the General was a man who knew how to rule! He killed his enemies, and kept his

allies where he could get rid of them if they weren't useful! Compared to him, those brats are just powerless boys, only

capable of sitting there and listening to what we tell them!"

He suddenly pointed at Ashen, and Cessilia raised her sword in a defensive stance.

"Why do you think I didn't get rid of this boy sooner? I had plenty of opportunities! But while he was alive, he made a

perfect puppet for us to use! Each Lord is more pathetic than the next, worthless, useless, and I knew he would follow what I told him, helpless as he was! ...Everything should have gone just fine. All I needed was to give him my daughter as a wife, and I would have controlled his heirs as I wanted! There is no need for a throne or a crown, I have always been the real King of this Kingdom! Unlike the Tyrant, I didn't need people to know my name. All I needed was the power that came with those responsibilities! I would have kept this Kingdom powerful, and safe from your damn Dragon Empire!"

"What of the cities outside the Capital?" asked Cessilia. "All those people dying of hunger? All the homeless, penniless people who can't live in the Capital?"

"There is no need to bother with the vermin," scoffed Yebekh. "It takes care of itself eventually. It will probably take decades before those wretched people figure it out, anyway. All we need in the Capital is for the money to flourish, our clan to prosper!"

"...So you're really just in it for the money and power," sighed Cessilia. "I was right. Even in a million years, you'll never be worthy of the King's position."

"You're just a pampered child coming from an all-powerful family!" he shouted. "You know nothing of real power!"

Only the Yekara Clan has what it takes to stand up to the Dragon Empire! You think things are so easy because your family has dragons to keep your people in check! Here, all we have are weapons and money!"

"...You seem to forget one thing, Yebekh," Cessilia retorted, finally stepping forward.

"The Dragon Empire's leader is a woman, and she has no dragon either. The only adult dragon in the Capital is my grandfather's, and he is too old to bother.

Moreover, our people do not fear our dragons anymore. My siblings and I have been playing in the streets with our dragons along with any commoner child. If anything, our people adore our dragons because they defend them. They don't fear them. You think only fear can allow one to rule? You're wrong. ...No, you're an idiot. You're the one who has no idea what makes this Kingdom's people feel safe or happy."

"How dare you?!" he shouted, furious. "This isn't your Kingdom! You know nothing!"

"I've seen and heard enough," Cessilia retorted.

The man took a step back, taken by surprise. This didn't even feel like he was facing the same woman from earlier. Her appearance had changed a lot. He could understand the ripped clothes, the dried blood, and the silver scales on her, but... what was making him retreat was her demeanor. She didn't act like the shy princess from before. He had thought this woman would

be easy to handle compared to the King, so how was she now facing him, acting tall, mighty, and as powerful as a queen?!

Cessilia had always been tall, but only now did she seem to look her full height, almost looking down on that pathetic man, and standing like a lioness between him and the King. No, she looked like a fierce dragon facing him, ready to spit her fire at a weak human. She was still clearly a human, so how were her green eyes so... scary? He took a deep breath and held his sword with two hands, getting ready for her to attack any second now. He could tell she was strong, and not as tired as he would have hoped for her to be. He had been able to stand on the sidelines while the King fought his adopted brother, but now, she was not going to let him get away so easily. She wasn't just blocking him from approaching the King, she was also standing in front of the large doors, making any attempt to flee impossible. He thought he'd be the one to lead the fight, so how was he feeling cornered already?!

"Real leaders are military, strategic leaders," he resumed, with a low voice. "Those young men are nothing but empty symbols for the people."

"Ashen resonates with his people more than you'll ever be able to understand."

"He's only a prince for show! That brat knows nothing!"

"He knows what his people's lives are like!" Cessilia suddenly shouted back. She stepped forward again, making the man even more nervous.

"He's a man of the people, and you're just a rat making a feast out of scraps," she continued with an ice-cold glare.

"You think you manipulate anything? You're just finding yourself excuses to remain the vulture hiding in the shadows. Ashen is the real King, and he will be for as long as he's alive. Even if something happened to him, those people would never accept you as their leader. ...Look outside, Yebekh. You've already lost. The people aren't the cowards you think. They'll fight with all their might for their freedom, and since you have no idea what those people truly want, you and your men will inevitably lose!"

Cessilia's sword was on him in a split second. Yebekh had to show his skills quickly to be able to block it at the very last second, and endure the tremendous strength of the Dragon Princess. He grimaced, holding his sword against hers. Their faces were so close she could see the pearls of sweat appearing on his forehead, and his teeth gritting from the effort. Cessilia was fed up with this man, and had no intention to give him any chance. She was sick of his underhanded ways, and ready to end him here and now. She suddenly released the pressure and spun around, launching a second assault with impressive speed.

In just a few clashes of swords, she was able to confirm Yebekh's skills and experience weren't fake or overestimated.

He truly had the right movements and reflexes of a man who had fought in a military camp most of his life. Her terrific strength was met with his best tactics to try and block her, again and again, as she intensified her attacks. Cessilia had to admit, the old snake was a decent fighter. In her father's army, he would have been amongst the best-ranked generals, capable of military strategy as well as fighting himself.

When they finally parted, her giving him a break, the man was out of breath but unscathed. Cessilia slowly spun her weapon in her hand, and retreated to get to Ashen, quickly checking on him. He had closed his eyes, but he was still slowly and steadily breathing. She slowly moved her wrists to stretch them a bit. His sword was larger than what she's used to and not the type she would have chosen, but she had to make do with it.

"If only you hadn't interfered..." hissed Yebekh. "I had this stupid boy in the palm of my hand!"

"I've already heard that today," groaned Cessilia, "and I pity you for not being able to realize how much of a good king you already had. If I hadn't interfered, you would have fallen all the same. It's your loss for underestimating how strong this Kingdom really is."

"Strong? You're the mistaken one, child! Those people are living with nothing! This Kingdom is destined for ruin if no strong man takes the reins!"

To his surprise and anger, Cessilia chuckled.

"...Do you know what those people really need, Yebekh?"

"Money!" he shouted. "Power, and the means to—"

"Fish beignets."

Cessilia's words surprised him so much, the man's expression fell, and he blinked twice, wondering if he hadn't

dreamed this stupidly simple couple of words. He scoffed.

"W-what did you say?"

"Fish beignets," Cessilia retorted, with a smile on her lips.

"Have you gone mad?!"

"I'm very serious," she said. "You've probably never had any, but what all those people outside need are tasty, warm

fish beignets. The taste of delicious food in the morning, warming up their hearts and filling their stomachs. You see, men like

you are the type to consider the Dorosef people as ignorant and harmless. When, in reality, they are exactly what the Kingdom

needs. Nothing but kindness, and the will to make other people's lives better. They do not care who eats the beignets they

prepare every morning. They are just happy to serve."

"You're ridiculous," grunted Yebekh. "There's no way stupid beignets—"

"It's not just stupid beignets. It's the best food I've ever tasted," chuckled Cessilia. "The fish is fresh, the dough is warm, and it just melts on your tongue and fills up your stomach. ...In fact, it's probably worth much more than they make people pay for it too, but the Dorosef don't care for money. All they want is to have others taste their food, and they always serve it with a smile. The Dorosef people are nothing like men like you, but they are the real owners of this Kingdom. They live every day with little to no expectations, only happy to fish, cook, and eat."

As she said this, Cessilia had naturally walked up to one of the windows, glancing outside. Ironically, from this tower, she could see the seashore and the harbor where the Dorosef ships were swaying on the sea. Despite the rain, it seemed much calmer and more peaceful than the burning city she had seen outside.

"This Kingdom's people have no need for a man like you, absolutely none, Yebekh. This Kingdom won't heal with more military power or political schemes. It will heal if we, the people, get along and help one another, if they understand each other, and open their doors, and their hearts. You think your Yekara Clan is better than the others, but you're the very last clan this population cares about, believe me. The warm herbal tea the Hashat makes is worth thousands of your swords. They will heal the Kingdom when it's needed, and study until its medical knowledge is on par with the Dragon Empire's. The Sehsan Tribe's beautiful creations will bring back color and hope in their lives. They can trade with the Empire, and bring even more wealth, even more beauty back to the Eastern Kingdom. They don't think about reinforcing borders, they think about what could be gained by opening them. Even the Cheshi are ready to ally with the people, stepping out of centuries-old secret hiding places to protect others!"

"Enough!" Yebekh shouted. "Those useless tribes' trinkets and stupid tea are meaningless! This Kingdom needs to get stronger!"

"You can't become stronger if you don't heal first," Cessilia retorted. "If I have learned one lesson since coming here, it is that. A kingdom needs time, patience, kindness, and faith to heal, just like people. Those people aren't just cattle who'll all depend on you. Each and every person out there is already doing their best and not waiting for their King to save them. They don't need a strong king, they need one that can understand them, get on their level, and give them time. Your greedy and brutal ways will only provoke more struggle and death. Look outside! You've already filled this Capital with blood and fire for power! What will happen to the whole Kingdom if a man like you ever holds more power?"

She took a deep breath, and returned to her original position, glaring at him.

"I won't allow it," she said. "I'll put an end to your ambitions, and help Ashen get it back on its feet."

"You can't stop us," he groaned. "Even if you kill me, another commander is ready to take over any minute! The Yekara Clan is stronger than you think!"

"Good," said Cessilia. "I don't care how long it'll take, but we'll make sure to end this. My brothers would call it boring if you made it too easy for us. Plus, I plan to stay here for a while."

"What gives you the right to interfere?!" he shouted, raising his sword and getting ready to defend himself again.

"You're just a child who came here on a whim!"

Cessilia chuckled, and raised her sword.

"Didn't you hear your King before, Lord Yebekh? I'm his Queen. I didn't come here on a whim, I came here to heal.

Now I'm ready to give back what this country gave me. ...Moreover, when the King needs her, it's the Queen's duty to step up and get rid of the vermin. Get in position, Yebekh. This girl is about to show you what a real fighter can do."

The loud growl of a furious Silver Dragon echoed with her words.

"You're—!"

Lord Yebekh never found anything to insult her with, and Cessilia didn't leave him the time to, either. She decided to resume this fight, more determined than ever. Her sword swung in his direction, and he only had enough time to raise his. Their swords clashed again, faster than before. They clearly had opposing objectives: Cessilia wanted to end this fight soon, while Yebekh wanted to make it last. It probably had to do with Ashen's condition. That man thought that if he could make this last long enough, the King would die. Cessilia had no intention to let him win. She was getting tired, and this was the last fight she couldn't wait to be done with.

She was already very different from the woman she was when she first arrived. Even since that morning, she felt like she had shed her old skin and been reborn into a stronger being, fiercer than ever. This time, she could proudly stand as the War God's daughter and Ashen's future Queen. She was pushing Yebekh more and more, not withholding her attacks, relentlessly pursuing the man. As he was trying to get away from her and her weapon, the man kept her circling around the room. The only thing Cessilia was adamant about was not letting this man anywhere near Ashen. She was protecting him, standing in the way as much as she could while trying to finish Yebekh off. It wasn't as easy as she had hoped. The man was truly skilled and experienced. Unlike most men, he knew not to rely on his strength alone, and was improving minute by minute, learning

Cessilia's style as much as she was learning his. It was no easy fight.

"My lord!"

The voices coming from behind her made Cessilia lose her focus. She glanced back, annoyed to see more Yekara

soldiers had made it all the way up to this room. She could already barely hold Yebekh at a distance!

"Ah!" shouted Yebekh. "See, a brat like you is no leader! You can't do anything if you're alone..."

Cessilia's green eyes suddenly went back to him, glowing with anger.

"Who said I was alone?"

A furious dragon growl resonated above their heads. It was louder than the thunder, like a deafening echo in the skies

above, surrounding the tower. Glimpses of flying silver scales flew by the windows like lightning bolts in the darkness. A

smile appeared on Cessilia's lips. The Yekara men were already staring toward the ceiling, looking afraid and unsure of what

to expect. They probably hadn't seen the giant Silver Dragon yet, and now they were in the front row seats. Shortly after, the

whole tower began to shake. A lot. Groaning and grimacing, Ashen forced himself to sit up, and using his arm, slowly retreated

until he was leaning his upper body against Cessilia's leg.

"...A friend?" he asked, looking up with a worried expression.

"I think she missed you more than I thought," chuckled Cessilia.

Another dragon growl resonated, higher-pitched. After more shaking, the tower stopped moving. It was only a second

before the roof was suddenly torn off. It happened so violently and quickly, it looked as if it had simply been popped up, the

whole ceiling disappearing in one go. The roof was literally sent flying god knows where, while stones from the top of the torn

walls were falling down the sides, in or out of the room. The tower itself trembled again, and a gigantic dragon's face

appeared above them. Ashen gasped.

"That can't be... Cece!" he exclaimed, a baffled expression stuck on his face.

The Silver Dragon answered with a gentle growl, before turning its large ruby eyes toward the Yekara soldiers that had

just appeared. Raising their spears and swords, the men were suddenly not so sure about attacking anymore. Cece let out that

strange scream, and most of them took a step back, unsure.

"Good girl," chuckled Ashen, clearly the only man happy to see the dragon.

Luckily, the tower they were in was much bigger than the one Jinn had destroyed, and a bit sturdier. As Cece suddenly

put a gigantic paw on the ground, the floor squeaked dangerously, but it held well under the pressure. The dragon's head was

right above the half-torn wall, and Cessilia guessed her dragon was probably supporting itself against the whole tower. Cece

was way too big to get inside, but the dragon would still make a trustworthy support against more enemies... Meanwhile, Ashen was still visibly in awe. He leaned against the silver-scaled paw.

"Damn, you're so big now... I missed you too, pretty girl."

Cece must have enjoyed the compliment, because he received a gentle growl and slight nudge in response.

"Ashen, you shouldn't move too much..."

Just as she said that, Cessilia watched him fight against his own body to get back up, although he immediately leaned against Cece's head, patting the dragon's snout. A happy Cece let out a gentle, soft growl.

"No way," he grimaced. "I'm done napping, I just needed a minute to catch up... I can't just stay still when we've got company, can I?"

One of the Yekara soldiers, braver than the others, suddenly decided to attack despite the dragon. With a yell, he ran forward with his sword.

Ashen only raised his leg with the right timing for the man to brutally run chest-first into his foot, losing his breath, and

stumble back. The King moved immediately to grab his spear from him, swinging the weapon around. He made a circular

motion with it, stabbing the soldier's shoulder, and threw him right into Cece's mouth.

The dragon who had opened its mouth in

a timely manner immediately closed it, chewing with a satisfied expression.

"See?" smiled Ashen, his eyes on the men. "I'll handle it just fine."

Cessilia was still worried, not about his skill, but by the fact that he needed to lean against her dragon to be capable of

standing. She knew Cece had also probably come back because of her own worry for Ashen. Her dragon was naturally

responding to her true feelings... However, Cessilia had resolved to not doubt him anymore, and she knew that Cece wouldn't

allow anyone to injure him either. Right now, those soldiers were her lesser concern.

She had to finish this fight, and for that,

she had to get rid of the main enemy, Lord Yebekh.

The hateful man was still standing on the opposite side of the tower, his shocked eyes still on the dragon. Then, he

shifted to Ashen, a grin appearing on his lips.

"This foolish man is only hurrying his demise. He might be acting like a tough fighter, but the poison will kill him

anyway..."

"I won't let that happen," retorted Cessilia.

She didn't have a single minute more to lose with empty talking and threats. She ran toward Yebekh, swinging her

sword with more resolve than ever. She knew she could finish this fight, she just had to find the right timing.

Strangely, Cessilia was having flashbacks of her training days while wielding her sword against Lord Yebekh. Her full attention was on this fight, but while facing one of the few people in this world who is actually on the same level as one of the War God's children, she couldn't help but remember her days in the North Army Camp. Their father had never let them rely on their strength alone. She had already fought against men bigger than she was, twice more experienced, or with the most dangerous weapon. Every time, her own strength hadn't been enough to simply win. There was no battle won with only speed, strength, or technique. Cessilia knew she should never underestimate anyone, and she wasn't letting Yebekh's vicious attacks get to her. She was standing her ground, offering him a real duel, not withholding her attacks, and not showing any gaps in her defense either. Her movements were precise, perfect. It was as if she was literally dancing around the room, trying to get the upper hand of this fight. It wasn't just about wielding a sword bigger than herself; Cessilia was using her whole body in each attack, all of her strength and focus. Yebekh was sweating and getting frustrated. Although he did think that woman could potentially give him a challenge, he was a man drunk on over thirty years of experience. Unlike Cessilia, he wasn't humble enough to realize a girl twice younger could possibly push him past his limits. Cessilia was his daughter's age, but making him sweat and tremble like he was back in his training days. No, in fact, he was slowly realizing how terrifying this woman was. No woman this young should have this much potential. She wasn't fighting like a young maiden with a bit of good training, she was fighting like an experienced swordmaster, and making him feel like a student! The sword fight between the two was turning into one of the best duels that could ever be witnessed. They were both incredibly fast, violent, and relentless. Even the Yekara soldiers and Ashen couldn't help but glance to the side several times, as if mesmerized by the superb choreography going on across the room. It was almost as if the two of them had rehearsed this beforehand, offering a ballet of blood and death. Each attack was potentially deadly, and only avoided by a hair, or blocked with equally impressive strength. Their movements were even hard for the naked eye to keep up with, as they only froze for seconds when their swords clashed, pressed against each other, and neither won, so they parted with a promise to try and kill each other again. They barely caught any breaks, and waited until they were steps away from each other, as if the short breaks had to be mutually agreed on.

Only the most experienced soldiers could tell Cessilia was starting to get the upper hand in this battle. The Princess was tired too, her body covered in sweat and blood, but she wasn't willing to stop at all. She was also doing an impressive job of keeping Yebekh cornered where she wanted him to be, as if she was making the rules and choosing the physical limits of their fight. No one would have dared to intrude, anyway. The soldiers were almost happy to face the King and the dragon rather than this woman that seemed possessed by death itself. She was like a goddess of war, as beautiful as she was scary, and unpacifiable. Foolish was the one who ever dared to take a single step in her path. Yebekh himself was barely surviving. The man was sweating twice as much as Cessilia, visibly out of breath, his limbs beginning to shake from the overexertion. The fight had insidiously shifted into more of a mental battle between the two. Physically, they were probably capable of remaining on an equal level, but psychologically, Cessilia was starting to make the man lose his ground. It was down to which one of them would admit defeat first, and Yebekh was slowly pushing past his own limits. He refused to admit how scary that woman was, while his whole body was about to beg for mercy. It was one leap he refused to take. He refused to be scared of her, but Cessilia was starting to grow into this furious, scary creature standing before him. The dragon that manifested in her furious movements, glowing green eyes, and powerful attacks was growing scarier every second. It was as if the more they fought, the more he discovered the dangerous beast behind the gentlewoman. The more he pushed her, the more powerful she became, and soon, she'd devour him whole. He couldn't understand. When? When did this foolish, weak, and stuttering woman grow into this fearsome monster? How could he lose? He, who had fought so long and so hard to get here? He had trained, relentlessly, day and night for years, only to be bested by a child? He just couldn't understand. No, he refused to admit he had already lost. Stumbling back, exhausted, scared, defeated, the man began to lose his grip on his weapon. His brain was screaming he had to run, to flee this place, far from those green eyes. He stumbled again and fell down, his eyes opened wide in horror. Cessilia knew she had won already. She slowly lowered her sword, pointing it toward his chest, and walked toward him. The man retreated, desperate, and suddenly, his hand touched something liquid and warm. Blood. He finally looked around, realizing he was in the middle of his own men's bodies. They were all dead, or dying with a limb or two torn off. The man gasped, as if he was horrified for the very first time by all the deaths he had caused.

His terrified eyes went back to Cessilia. He could almost see it. Behind that girl, the shadow of a warrior, that dark aura that belonged to the real monster, the War God who had forged his daughter into a being as terrifying as himself. Yebekh could see it now. That child wasn't enhanced by her dragon blood, but by the teachings of the best fighter of all. The one who had earned his title of War God. Who was he, a mere mortal, to think he could ever stand a chance against that...?

"P-p-please," he begged, completely out of it. "I-I'm sorry. I'll stop. I'll stop. I-I'm sorry. ...I-I beg you..."

To his surprise, Cessilia actually stopped walking. Her green eyes weren't betraying anything, and for a fateful second, he really thought he could beg for his life to be spared. That was it. She was still a woman, a young child who could be begged, convinced, swayed. She had to have some pity for the weak, some mercy. If he could convince her to let him go, then he'd be able to survive this, and then—

A large hand suddenly covered his vision. He felt himself being brutally pulled backwards, and his back violently hit the cold metal of armor.

"You don't deserve to be spared, you bastard," whispered a voice next to his ear.

"You've got to pay for all the lives you sacrificed."

Ashen put the blade against his neck, and mercilessly sliced his throat. Yebekh only made one throaty sound, and fell

forward, his face in his men's blood, his eyes still wide open. He was dead.

Cessilia let out a long sigh.

"...It's over," she muttered.

Ashen nodded, but right after, he grimaced and fell backwards. Cece moved immediately, and he landed gently against the dragon's snout with a grunt.

"Damn it."

Cessilia ran to his side, checking on him.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm feeling great," he lied. "I would have taken him, but... I figured you should have the fun. Oh, fucking poison..."

"It's alright. Just lie down... No, actually, let's get on Cece and take you to the Hashat Family, they'll have what you

need. You did well," she added with a gentle kiss against his cheek.

"Thanks... We'll just pretend that's true when your cousin's around, please? I don't mind my Queen saving the day, but I know she's going to give me hell for just lying there and my ego can only take so much bruising at once..."

"Ashen, stop talking. Just get on."

The truth was, Cessilia knew he was already in a bad condition when they had gotten here. It was impressive he had

managed so well and won against dozens of men when most wouldn't even have been able to get up... Even with the dose of poison he had received, she thought he was still surprisingly fine. He could barely stand, and his complexion wasn't too good, but she had really feared for his life all along. Even now, he was still standing and gently pushed her hand away when she was trying to have him get on the Silver Dragon.

"No," he said. "We have to stop the fights first."

"We can have Cece do it after. For now—"

"No, we have to stop the Yekara from fighting. Now," he insisted.

To Cessilia's surprise, he walked away from her, and stumbled all the way to Yebekh's body, grabbing the dead man by his hair. His eyes stopped for a moment to glance at his adopted brother. For a very brief moment, Cessilia thought she saw a melancholic expression in his eyes, but when he turned around, it was already gone. He walked back up to her, pulling Yebekh's body.

"...What are you going to do?" she asked, confused.

"I have a formula that works... Let's get to the plaza."

Cessilia helped him get on Cece. The Silver Dragon tried to take a bite of Yebekh's body, without success, and took off with an annoyed growl. As they rose higher in the sky, they both got a better view of the half-destroyed castle. It was truly a mess down there, with two towers wrecked, and possibly much more damage than they could see.

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

"Don't worry. I never really liked this place anyway... and we can always build a better one. One you'll enjoy living in."

Cessilia smiled and nodded. It would have almost been a romantic moment if they didn't have a third and dead passenger with them...

Cece effortlessly took them to the plaza where the fight was still going on, although clearly ending. Just like they had already predicted, the Yekara were unwilling to stop fighting despite their defeat growing more and more obvious. That's when Ashen pushed Yebekh's body off Cece's back.

It took a couple of seconds to violently hit the ground below, provoking a surprise amongst the fighters. Everybody stopped, as the body had been dropped right in the middle of the plaza. The closest people immediately recognized his face, and soon, the word spread that Lord Yebekh was dead.

"Yekara!" shouted Ashen. "Your leader is dead! If you don't drop your weapons now, you will all suffer the same fate!"

It took a few seconds, and many of the Yekara fighters gathered to see the body for themselves. Some exchanged words between themselves but as soon as one of them dropped their weapons, many others did the same. Soon enough, they saw many pairs of hands in the air, the Yekara troops capitulating. Cessilia found her cousin on the other side, who was grimacing, shaking her sword. "Damn it, Cessi, you party-pooper!"

Chapter 30

"...Ashen, you should go get treated," Cessilia muttered, gently patting his shoulder. "I'm fine," he shook his head. "We need to get where your brother is and stop the fight there too if possible..."

"There's no need."

To their surprise, Kian suddenly arrived with an excited growl, flying next to Cece, mounted by Kassian.

"We're done over there," he said.

"Kassian!" exclaimed Cessilia, surprised. "Already?"

"A lot of them were mostly trying to regroup at their headquarters, but it seems like someone already set it on fire..."

"On fire?"

Kassian's eyes went to the other side of the battlefield, where Cessilia found Nana and Darsan together, chatting

excitedly. She turned her eyes back to Tessandra, who shrugged.

"Don't ask," sighed Tessa. "I think Nana has turned into a little terror on her own."

"...Aren't you guys going to come down? I'm breaking my neck just watching you up there!"

Cessilia turned to Ashen.

"...You really need to get treated for that poison, Ashen. You can barely stand."

"I'm not leaving you," he said. "The last time I did, I almost got killed."

Cessilia smiled, a bit happy and a bit torn inside. However, Cece had clearly chosen her camp. She lowered herself

until the two of them could jump down and land safely. Unfortunately, the Silver Dragon was too large to land there without

crushing everyone on the plaza. Luckily, Kian was right there, and as soon as the dragon's rider got off its back too, the older

Silver Dragon was only happy to play around with Cece. Soon enough, the two sibling dragons began to play around in the sky,

flying and chasing each other's tails with excited growls while Cessilia and the others gathered on the ground.

"...What do we do with them?" Cessilia sighed, looking at the Yekara soldiers.

All of them were still looking confused, and staring at their dead leader with a strange interest.

"Darsan and I can gather them for now," said Tessandra. "I'm sure there will still be a few trying to flee, so we can make sure we get all of them first..."

Ashen shook his head, looking annoyed. He had his arm around Cessilia's shoulders to support himself, but couldn't

help but grimace often. Cessilia turned to her cousin.

“...Is Ishira around?”

“Ishira? Uh... didn't she set up some sort of relief tent or something outside?”

Her eyes went to Ashen, and she raised an eyebrow.

“...Did you get your butt rescued again, Your Majesty?” she smirked.

“Not at all. Cessi had time to drink tea while I did everything. I even poured it for her.”

“Yeah, sure. Anyway, you're starting to look as white as your hair, so if I were you, I'd actually make that stop by the house, two streets behind me. The Hashat took over a house and are treating people there. It's easy to find, just follow all the big babies whining.”

“Noted.”

Ashen sighed, and leaned closer to Cessilia, gently kissing her chestnut curls.

“I'll be right back.”

“I'm coming with you. I want to check on the injured people and see if there's anything I can do while Tessa and Darsan gather the Yekara soldiers.”

“I'll hunt the mercenaries too,” said Kassian, “from the sky. Like Tessa said, some will probably try to flee or hide...”

Kian!”

Above them, the two dragons were getting a bit too excited, and their growls were growing terribly louder. Not only that, they had begun snapping at each other, their play getting a bit more violent. Kassian sighed, but with a little smile on his lips.

“I can't blame him. He must have missed his little sister...”

He exchanged a smile with Cessilia, who nodded happily. Indeed, the two dragons' enthusiasm was heartwarming to see. She knew her older brother was also probably very happy to see Cece back...

“You know, there's nothing little about our Cece now,” chuckled Tessandra, who was staring at the duo above too.

“Kian's the one looking like he's the little brother now...”

“It doesn't matter,” said Kassian.

He winked at his little sister, making Tessandra roll her eyes.

“Ugh. Anyway, you'd better take those two out of the Capital's skies soon before they destroy something. Plus, once Krai joins the fun, they are going to be impossible to calm. Thank the gods we left that stupid Dran at home...”

Cessilia couldn't help but think about all of Cece's siblings at home too. The smaller dragons would be so happy to see their older sister was back...

“Cece will help you put out the fires too,” she told him.

Kassian nodded, and turned around to climb on the roof, probably getting to a higher point to catch the dragons' attention.

“Cece is back?!”

Darsan had run to them. For some reason, he was dragging four men by the collar with each hand, and Nana was following right behind him, her eyes lit up in awe.

"That dragon is so pretty!" she exclaimed.

"There you are, the pair of walking natural disasters," scoffed Tessandra, putting her hands on her hips. "Yes, she is."

"Awesome! Hey! Big girl!" Darsan waved, dropping the men at his feet.

"...What are those?"

"Oh, just some that refused to give up, so I kicked their butts, but I wondered what we're supposed to do with them..."

Nana said not to kill them, so I just figured I'd ask."

"The war is over, right?" Nana asked Cessilia and the King with a worried expression. The two of them exchanged a smile.

"Yes, it is."

"Alright," said Tessandra. "Darsan, you and I are supposed to gather the Yekara that are left, all of them, so come and help me. Nana, now that you get the gist, can you go get that old butt of a dragon and do the same outside?"

"I got it!" Nana nodded strongly, showing her little fists.

"Let's go, Nana," exclaimed Darsan happily. "I'll escort you back to Krai!"

The two of them left, and Cessilia turned to Tessandra, confused.

"...Nana actually rode Krai? ...Alone?"

"Yeah... She's really getting quite impressive, our tiny Nana. But, as long as we keep flammable stuff away from her, we should be alright."

"...Didn't you just send her to get an actual dragon?" Ashen asked, raising an eyebrow. Tessandra opened her mouth, and closed it after a second. After realizing the King's words were right, she let out a sigh.

"Alright, I'm going to go look after the two terrors. We'll regroup once you're better and we're done here. See you then..."

She shook her head and left toward the crowd, already shouting orders at their allies. Ashen chuckled.

"Your family is just as reckless and impulsive as I remember..."

"And that's just half of them," chuckled Cessilia. "Come on, let's get you treated now."

The two of them left toward the house Tessandra had indicated. Just like her cousin had said, the place was already

crowded with injured men, some with light injuries, some on the verge of dying. Cessilia recognized some of the Hashat

people trying to keep them in order, and even some Cheshi helping. Luckily, many people recognized the King. In the short

while that they had spoken with Tessandra, the word had already spread about Lord Yebekh's death, and most people knew the

war was over. In a matter of minutes, people gathered around the couple, either thanking them or simply cheering. Cessilia felt

a bit overwhelmed by the sudden attention when all Ashen needed was some quiet. Bastat quickly stepped in between them and the rowdy crowd.

"If you're all up," she said, "I guess you can make some room for the people who actually need the space!"

Cessilia was surprised. It was the first time she saw Lady Bastat actually get mad and raise her voice. Right now, the lady was acting like a wall between the two of them and the crowd. The people suddenly got a bit embarrassed or glared at her, but sure enough, many quietly returned to their beds, or left the building with sour expressions.

"These people," she sighed. "Really, if they can stand, they should be helping out..." She turned around to face them, and Cessilia realized the lady herself was injured. Her left arm was wrapped in bandages, and she was limping slightly as well.

"Lady Bastat, are you alright?" Cessilia asked, worried.

"Yes," the young woman nodded. "Thanks to your older brother. I made a silly mistake during the fight, and His Highness was quick to take me to safety... so I overtook the command here, as much as I could. Luckily, most citizens were

reasonable enough to stay home or help their neighbors. It's mostly Royal Guards coming here injured, or people who got into accidents because of the fires... Are you alright, Your Majesty? You look quite pale."

Ashen grimaced. Just as Cessilia expected, he hated his condition being pointed out. She stepped forward in his stead.

"Do you think we could get... some privacy? I want to treat him myself, and then I'll help around here if needed."

"You can go upstairs. We just emptied one of the bedrooms, so you and His Majesty can take it. I will have some medicine brought to you as soon as possible. Do you know what you'll need, exactly?" Quickly, Cessilia listed for Bastat all the herbal medicine she was going to need, and soon after, helped Ashen upstairs.

Just as she had suspected, he had been holding on well all this time, but the young King passed out almost as soon as he laid

down. Luckily, his life wasn't in danger. Cessilia treated him quietly with the herbal medicine procured and stitched all the

cuts she could find on his body. The more she examined him, the more she was convinced that Kassian's blood he had been

transfused with had helped Ashen considerably. The poison he had received was very potent, yet the treatment he actually

needed from her was rather simple. His body had been fighting the toxins by itself all this time, and the medicine just gave it an

extra boost. The blood loss was a bit more worrisome, but now that he could get some rest, he would probably be fine.

Cessilia treated him, grateful to finally be able to catch a break.

When she finally stepped out of the room, Ashen was still unconscious, but he was safe. She let out a little sigh of

relief. It sounded like things were busy everywhere else in the building, so she barely reacted when someone approached.

"Lady Cessilia?"

"Sabael!"

She hadn't expected to see Nana's older brother here, but it was obvious he was injured as well, his shoulder covered in bandages. He politely bowed a bit.

"Is His Majesty alright?" he asked. "I heard he was brought here too..."

"He's alright, he's resting in the room behind me. What about you? What happened?"

"Ah, I got burned a little... It's really not as bad as it looks, but Tessa insisted I get treated. ...You?"

"I'm fine," Cessilia nodded. "...Sabael, can I ask you for a favor?"

He smiled, and glanced at the door behind her.

"I'll guard His Majesty," he immediately said, bowing respectfully. "Don't worry, no one will dare to enter while I'm here."

"Thank you."

The two of them exchanged an understanding smile. Cessilia was glad that there were some loyal, hardworking young men like Sabael still following Ashen. If people had only been following him because of his alliance with a princess of the

Dragon Empire, it would have been far more difficult. Yet today, many Royal Guards had valiantly fought against the Yekara, despite the odds, to defend whom they thought of as their legitimate King. Not only the guards, but many citizens had cheered

for Ashen as well. She could tell when they had walked into this house; many eyes had gone to him, the brave white-haired

King. In her heart, she was probably the proudest of his achievements. This Kingdom was indeed in a bad state, but if things

continued like this, with one less enemy in their way, she had high hopes for its future.

Feeling a bit better, and relieved about Ashen's condition and safety, Cessilia went back downstairs to help, as

promised. In fact, many eyes were happy to see her too, recognizing the Princess' unique appearance. As the battle had ended,

many more people were brought in to be treated, and soon, luckily no one was able to bother Cessilia unless it was for a valid

injury. Lady Bastat was no healer, but she was doing an amazing job orchestrating everything, even overseeing the stocks of

fresh towels and warm water, and coordinating with the other tribes and families to know who could provide what. Strangely,

Cessilia felt most relaxed when she was healing someone. The smell of medicinal herbs and the touch of medical tools were

making her feel she was in the right place. Helping lessen someone's pain was much more rewarding than inflicting injuries,

and she was happy to set her weapons aside. She was so used to treating people that she could do it without much thinking, one

patient after the other, for hours. In fact, it was Lady Bastat that finally got her to stop and take a break, almost pulling her away from her last patient and to the side. Then, she made Cessilia sit down, and handed her a familiar fish beignet.

"Thank you," Cessilia smiled.

"You deserve much more than that, but that's all we have for now," sighed Lady Bastat.

"You should rest, my lady.

We're pretty much done evacuating the battlefields, people coming in now only have light injuries. Many are already busy trying to clear the streets, and I think your other older brother is helping them as well."

"Did you hear from Tessa?"

"She sent someone to say not to worry," Bastat nodded. "They have the situation under control."

"They arrested all the Yekara already?"

Cessilia and Bastat turned their heads, finding Sabael and Ashen standing there, both looking surprised. As a reflex,

Cessilia walked up to the King, glancing down at his abdomen.

"I'm fine," he immediately said. "I shamelessly took a nap while you've been working hard."

"Most people would be passed out for one more day from your injuries, Your Majesty," Sabael shook his head. "That was only three or four hours."

"Anyway," Ashen sighed, "I want to go see how my men are. The Yekara too, I need to decide what to do with them..."

Just like that, the three of them agreed to go out and find Tessandra, leaving Bastat behind to keep supervising the healing and food distribution.

On the way back to the battlefield, Cessilia was amazed by everything that had already been done in the few hours she

had been busy treating people. The streets were mostly cleared, most of the rubble having been pushed to the side, and people

were already loading carts with what had to be taken away. The bodies of their deceased allies were covered by sheets, and

some people were trying to identify them or line them up. Many families had come out of hiding to help sweep the streets, give

a hand to those whose homes had been destroyed, or distribute food. Cessilia even spotted children happily handing out warm

drinks. The rain had stopped too, and as if to salute the end of the fighting, the sun was starting to shyly appear between the

clouds. She held Ashen's hand with a warm feeling in her heart as they walked down the streets, crossing paths with more and

more people who happily waved at their easily recognizable King. She could definitely see herself happily walking down

those streets for many more years...

"Oh, look who's here!"

Tessandra cheerfully waved at them. Funny enough, she, Darsan, and Nana were eating fish beignets around a fire, taking a break as well. Tessandra walked up to them first, suddenly jumping at Sabael's neck and hugging him.

"Tessa!" he exclaimed, obviously embarrassed. "Easy, please..."

"Did you get treated?" she asked, immediately pulling his jacket open. "Did you? It's not going to leave a scar, is it?"

"I-I don't know... Why? Will you leave me if I get a scar?"

"Of course not!" she slapped his arm. "I'm just going to get mad if I don't have someone to burn back for damaging my boyfriend!"

"Your boyfriend?" Darsan suddenly frowned. "Since when?"

"You really are slow, Darsan..."

"There's someone who actually wants you?" he laughed.

"Yeah," Tessa retorted with a sour expression. "I think it's a family thing, they really have poor tastes..."

Her eyes went to Nana, making Darsan frown, confused again. Cessilia chuckled, relieved to see all of them seemed completely fine. Nana had a few bandages on her hands and legs, but she was happily smiling at Darsan and Tessa's antics, her plump cheeks stuffed with warm food. Behind the trio, the battlefield was almost cleared already, with more of the Royal Guards still working to sort things out.

"What about the remaining Yekara?" Ashen asked, frowning.

"The Cheshi locked them all up," said Tessandra. "We suspect some of them are still hiding, but we probably got most of them."

"I would say so too," suddenly announced Kassian's voice.

They turned around, and Cessilia's older brother approached from behind them, looking a bit tired. Nana immediately jumped to hand him a beignet.

"Oh, uh, thank you."

"Where have you been?" Tessa frowned. "I saw Kian and Cece flying south minutes ago!"

"I just made a quick stop," said Kassian, glancing down at his beignet and avoiding eye contact with her.

Cessilia didn't say anything, but she did notice the new bandage around his dominant hand...

Suddenly, Kassian looked up at the sky, and Cessilia and Darsan did the same, getting the same feeling he did. The three siblings were the first to notice the new silhouette in the sky. Soon, all of them had their eyes up, staring at the dark clouds.

"Who is it?" Darsan kept asking, visibly nervous. "What color is the dragon, I can't see!"

"Oh, you're so in trouble," chuckled Tessandra. "They are going to kick you right back to that stupid mountain..."

"A mountain?" asked Nana, confused.

"I-it's nothing!" Darsan said, embarrassed.

Cessilia kept squinting her eyes to try and see the dragon's color too. It was hard to tell, as it was flying amongst the dark clouds and still quite far away.

"...I think it's green," she suddenly muttered.

"Ah!" exclaimed Darsan, throwing his fists in the air. "Tessa, you're the one in dragon sh—"

"Shut up!" she shouted back at him. "...It can't be right? Right? Mom freaking hates flying!"

Cessilia was a bit surprised and confused too. Now that it was getting closer, that dragon was definitely Roun, her uncle's Green Dragon. But she couldn't see why her uncle or aunt would be coming all the way here... not even scolding their runaway daughter would be enough to come all the way to the Eastern Kingdom with Roun. Moreover, she was sure her mother would have mentioned to her sister that Tessandra was here, so it wasn't like they would be actively searching for her either.

"...It's a woman," squealed Darsan, who was already laughing. "Oh, it's got to be Aunt Missandra. Tessa, I'm sure you're about to get your butt whoo—"

"No," said Kassian. "That's... No way?"

Cessilia had realized the woman's identity at the same time. All three siblings and Tessandra exchanged surprised glances, completely dumbfounded.

"Wha-... What the fuck is Grandma doing here?!" exclaimed Tessandra.

"...Is that a bad thing?" asked Sabaël, visibly confused by their reactions.

"Oh, love, if you think dragons are scary, just you wait until you meet our grandmother," sighed Tessandra.

"Speak for yourself," chuckled Darsan. "I'm Grandma's favorite."

"In your dreams, Darsan."

"What is she doing here?" wondered Cessilia, turning to Kassian. "Do you think something happened back home?"

Her big brother seemed as unsure as her, slowly shaking his head. All of them waited for the Green Dragon to get closer with, indeed, the older woman standing on its back. Because Roun wasn't as big as the other dragons, it meant the older dragon could land in the plaza, which happened to have much more space available now. The Green Dragon landed gracefully, its yellow eyes riveted on Tessandra, its snout immediately nudging her.

"Hi there," muttered Tessandra, petting her father's dragon.

However, like her cousins, she was a little more preoccupied by the imposing woman riding the dragon.

"Grandma!" exclaimed Darsan, the only one overjoyed.

He ran to the dragon's side, helping their grandmother get off its back.

With one glance at that woman, Nana realized whom Cessilia got her height from. Not only that, but the woman was

incredibly beautiful, with long hair dyed a burgundy color, a gorgeous long dress a shade darker, and countless pieces of golden jewelry. Her eyes were even more impressive, almond-shaped and as dark as obsidian gems. It looked as if a goddess had just elegantly landed in front of them. She got down from the dragon gracefully with her grandson's help. As soon as she was on the ground, she turned around and with long fingers and nails, gently pinched Darsan's cheek.

"Hello there, my darling."

Darsan took the pinching without blinking, a large smile stuck on his face.

"Grandma, what are you doing here?" asked Cessilia, stepping forward.

"What do you mean, 'What am I doing here?'" her grandmother retorted, turning back to them. "I prepared for days and

then bothered to go all the way to that cold, gloomy Onyx Castle only to find your imbecile father all alone! Then, I have to take

a long trip, all by myself, to that stupidly huge palace, and listen to that selfish daughter of mine happily announcing that half of

my dearest grandchildren actually went all the way to the Eastern Kingdom! What did you expect, of course I had to come and

check on my grandbabies! Those selfish brats never think of me!"

Sabael was starting to understand what Tessa meant; that woman was already scary enough with her imposing voice,

but she was even referring to the Dragon Empress and the War God as... selfish brats?!

He glanced around, and all four of her

grandchildren had visibly shrunk, a bit cautious about their grandmother's terrible temperament.

"Sorry, Grandmother," said Kassian. "Everything happened a bit suddenly—"

"You," she suddenly pointed a finger at Ashen. "You're the reason my dear granddaughter came here, aren't you?"

"Long time no see, Lady Kareen," Ashen bowed.

"Oh, don't act all cute with me," she scrunched her nose. "I'll take care of you later, you little brat."

Ashen grimaced, but nodded, a bit helpless. Cessilia couldn't help but bite her lower lip, selfishly enjoying this scene.

Only her grandmother could make Ashen look this tame...

"What happened here?!" exclaimed the older lady, looking around. "I just came here and this is the landscape? What

did you children do this time?"

"Just a war, Grandma," Tessandra sighed. "It wasn't even our fault, and we did win, by the way."

"If you won, how come this place is so messy?! Didn't my son teach you all how to fight without making this much of a mess?! And this!"

She grabbed Darsan's arm, pointing at an injury on his biceps.

"Who dares to injure one of my precious grandsons?!" she shouted, furious. "I hope you kept those bastards alive so I

can finish them off myself!"

"I'm fine, Grandma. Plus, their leader's already dead," said Darsan. "We were just rounding the survivors up at the moment—"

"Oh, were you?"

A vicious smile appeared on the woman's lips, sending a chill down Nana and Sabael's spines. The speed in which her mood completely shifted from anger to amusement was scary.

"Keep some of them for me then. Their leaders. I'm going to teach them what happens to whoever dares to touch my grandbabies!"

"...Grandma, you just came to have fun, didn't you?" chuckled Tessa.

Before she could react, a loud and scary smack echoed. Sabael only had to turn his eye to see Lady Kareen with a closed fan in her hands, and Tessandra holding her head with a grimace.

"Grandma, what the heck was that for?!" she cried, rubbing her painful scalp.

"Discipline," she shrugged. "You're way too noisy. Now, Cessilia, my dear."

"Yes, Grandmother?" Cessilia stepped forward.

"Did I see my dear Cece flying earlier? Your dragon is back?"

"Yes, Grandmother," she smiled. "She's back and she's fine."

"...Hmpf. It was high time."

With a complex expression, Lady Kareen suddenly opened her fan and began fanning herself slowly, glancing around. It

was as if she was annoyed to even be gracing the soil with her presence. Then, her eyes settled on Nana and Sabael, an

eyebrow raised. The two of them were still mute and very unsure about the scary arrival of the legendary War God's own

mother. The older lady was unlike any elder they had ever met before.

"Grandma!" exclaimed Darsan, jumping at the occasion.

He suddenly pushed Nana forward with his big smile.

"This is Naptunie!"

"Naptunie, is it?" said Lady Kareen.

"Y-yes, my lady..."

Nana was literally sweating bullets, unsure if she was supposed to hold her stare or not.

Fidgeting with her fingers as

her nervousness rose, she glanced toward Cessilia and Tessandra, who both seemed just as confused. After a long while,

Kareen smiled.

"I like her," she simply said.

"Right?!" exclaimed Darsan with a proud expression. "Our Nana is the best."

"...That's it?" muttered Tessandra. "It's not like Nana's wearing her big brains in plain sight..."

Kareen then turned to Sabael and Tessandra tensed up. Meanwhile, with an amused smile on her lips, Cessilia subtly

moved toward Ashen, leaning against him while watching the poor, nervous Sabael being scrutinized by her grandmother.

“...What is your name?” she asked coldly.

“Sabael, Your Highness,” he immediately answered, bowing with his soldier’s reflexes, “from the Dorosef Tribe. I’m a Royal Guard and Naptunie’s older brother.”

“Are you?”

“He’s my boyfriend,” added Tessandra with a confident smile.

Her grandmother’s eyes very briefly shifted to Tessandra.

“...Is he?”

It was as if she was testing the two of them. Cessilia saw Sabael very clearly take a deep breath in and nod, his hand tight around his sword’s handle.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“My granddaughter is quite the wildcat,” said Kareen, rubbing her finger against her lips with an enigmatic expression.

“I know, Your Highness. But I’ve learned to like her character.”

“She is a strong woman, like all my children; most men don’t think well of a woman who can beat them.”

“My pride isn’t so small nor fragile that it could be damaged by a defeat, Your Highness,” Sabael replied, his eyes

stuck on the ground, “no matter who it is against. I will keep training until I can stand on equal ground to Lady Tessa.”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a surprised look. It was the first time Sabael spoke so much, and to speak about his relationship with Tessandra too. Not only that, but he was impressive in how he proudly stood his ground against one of the most powerful women in this world... After a long while, another mysterious smile appeared on Lady Kareen’s lips.

“Oh, well. Perhaps you’ve found your match after all, Tessandra.”

“Right?” Tessandra smiled, undeniably the proudest.

“Now,” said Lady Kareen, turning to them, “your grandmother is thirsty, tired, and bored after flying on a dragon to come all the way here and visit her runaway grandchildren. Are none of you going to properly welcome me yet?”

“Technically, no one invited you, Grandma...” muttered Tessandra.

She was smart enough to cover her scalp before her grandma decided to hit her again. Cessilia chuckled, and turned to Nana instead.

“The castle is mostly destroyed at the moment... and not good to welcome Grandmother. Do you think there is a better place?”

“W-well, if it’s alright,” said Nana, “we could go to my family home, but... it’s much, much smaller than a palace... probably.”

Kareen rolled her eyes.

“Only my children have grown used to unnecessarily large palaces and castles!” she exclaimed. “I may have mothered

a bunch of dragon brats, but I wasn't born on a bed of gold! Dear, your house will be just fine, as long as there's a place for me to sit other than a bunch of scales! No offense to you, my darling, thank you for the trip." She put a quick kiss on Roun's snout, and turned to Nana.

"Lead the way, darling."

Naptunie enthusiastically nodded, while Darsan jumped to his grandmother's side to offer his arm to escort her. In fact, as she calmly walked away, it was quite impressive that she barely seemed to need any help to walk through the absolute wreck that was the plaza in high heels. Tessandra watched the trio walk away, still rubbing her scalp.

"...Is that old hag never going to get... old?" she groaned. "How the heck does she not age?"

Cessilia chuckled.

"It's Grandma. ...Do you think she's really here just because she missed us?"

Before Kassian could answer, her cousin rolled her eyes.

"You know Grandma," scoffed Tessandra. "She makes people come to her, not the other way around. I bet she left

without telling anyone just to piss off our aunt again. You know the only thing that makes the Empress really crazy is when her own mother decides to cause a mess elsewhere..."

"A mess?" Ashen frowned. "What kind of mess?"

"Nothing," chuckled Cessilia. "Grandma's bored and came to see us to be amused."

"...And piss off Auntie."

"Anyway, should we go too?" Kassian sighed. "To be honest, I'm getting hungry as well.

We can probably leave the

Clan Leaders and the Cheshi to settle things here."

"And we could all use a shower," added Tessandra with a frown. "I'm smelling worse than Roun and it is definitely not a great sensation."

They all agreed to slowly follow Lady Kareen and Nana's lead.

It felt a bit strange, after the whole ordeal, to simply walk away from the battlefield, but they were indeed not needed

so much anymore. The Cheshi were already guarding the captured Yekara, and it would take a little while longer before they

were all properly made prisoners and sorted in one place. The dragons had also helped hasten the capture of those who

remained outside the Capital's Outer Wall, so the only enemies still free had chosen to flee for their lives, most likely the

mercenaries. In fact, Cessilia was pretty sure it had turned into a giant hunting party for their dragons, as Tessandra confirmed

when Roun took off.

"Just go get them!" she patted her father's dragon before it flew off.

They watched the Green Dragon slowly climb up in the sky and meet with Cece and Kian, the three of them playing for

a bit before disappearing behind the buildings of the Capital, toward the south behind the Outer Wall. Although they couldn't see the dragons anymore, they could hear them all, including Krai, and tell they were probably having some fun. Cece was so big that they could sometimes see the silver body shining in the sky before the dragon dove down again.

"Is it alright to leave the dragons outside to hunt?" frowned Ashen.

"Don't worry," said Kassian. "They know how to recognize mercenaries. Father used to send them all the time to hunt the marauders or bandits in the Northern Mountains when we were younger. They know not to touch villagers and innocents.

They can smell who has their hands covered in blood or not, and your people already know the dragons are on their side. They probably won't be so silly as to run away."

Ashen nodded, but he might have still been a bit worried. Cessilia wasn't. In fact, she had never felt so relieved and happy. To see Cece happily playing around and flying was the best blessing she could have received. She knew her dragon was just as happy to be back and to reunite with their dragon family. In fact, her family back home probably already knew of Cece's return as well.

With a lighter heart, she held on a bit tighter to Ashen, her arm around his waist, and they walked together to the main house of the Dorosef Tribe. Apparently, Lady Kareen had really taken a liking to the younger girl, and they could hear Naptunie enthusiastically presenting every street of the city, explaining the various tribes, and what shops had the best items, while Darsan followed right behind her, listening to her every word.

"...I'll never understand those two," sighed Tessandra. "To think the nervous Nana would be so fearless in front of Grandma..."

"Why do you let your grandmother hit you?" grimaced Sabael, glancing at her scalp.

"Trust me, it's much worse if you try to run."

Cessilia chuckled. In fact, she wasn't surprised that Lady Kareen had immediately taken a liking to Naptunie. Their friend was bright and loveable, and after a lifetime of schemes and intrigues, there was nothing their grandmother enjoyed more than simple, kind-hearted people. Which was probably why she liked the candid Nana and Darsan alike.

While they walked, Cessilia couldn't help but glance around at the sad state of the Capital. It had suffered a lot from the battle. Some streets were completely ravaged and blocked, and some houses had been destroyed by the fire. There was a heavy smell of ashes, smoke, and blood soaking the whole place. For once, Cessilia wished the rain was a bit heavier so it would

have washed it all away, but there was now only a gentle drizzle over them. Strangely though, there was none of that strange post-battle quietness she would have expected. In fact, the whole Capital seemed determined to resume life as fast as possible.

Every street they saw, people were already trying to find a way to clear paths, build back the houses, and help whoever needed it. She saw women guarding many children together, and men working together to sort out debris. Some children were even playing with the ice and snow that Cece had left on several buildings, discovering the cold, white powder for the very first time in their life. A few even seemed to have fun trying to chase the dragons' shadows when one flew over.

Many Royal Guards that had fought by their side were offering to help where they could, but also receiving food or

treatment from the grateful citizens. In fact, many eyes didn't even notice as their little group walked past, everyone busy on their own. Cessilia realized the Hashat had prepared many more houses and shops to receive injured people, and the Cheshi

were still actively hunting fugitives, while the Dorosef, as usual, were the first to distribute food and make sure everyone had a

roof over their head. As they arrived at the entrance of a very busy Dorosef residence, she had a smile on her face. It was her

first time being there, but aside from its size, the house was like many others in the Capital. There was light inside the large

house, and already a lot happening on the patio. Large and tall silhouettes were running in and out, carrying big trays, and the

strong aroma of beignet batter could be smelled from all the streets around. She could hear female voices asking for more fish

to be brought, while children were running around and carrying little packages to deliver to every corner of the Capital. At the

entrance, they spotted Kareen, already chatting with one of the leaders of the tribe, Nana in between. Their grandmother was

holding a fish beignet between her hands, intrigued.

"For you!"

Cessilia lowered her eyes to a little girl that was happily handing them fresh beignets too. The children were tasked

with giving those to everyone who came to the residence. They thanked her, and took them, watching the young lady run back

inside the house, probably to get more to hand out.

"...You have good citizens."

Kassian's words took them all by surprise. Ashen and Cessilia, who were standing side by side, and Tessa and Sabael

on the other side, exchanged surprised looks, until the King nodded. Kassian was standing there, holding his beignet, just

watching the crowd around them with a neutral expression.

"I know," Ashen said finally, a smile crossing his lips.

"I talked a bit with Lady Bastat," Kassian continued. "If we were able to reopen the commerce between our two countries, given the level of the Eastern Kingdom in some areas, it would definitely be profitable both to you and the Empire.

We would need to discuss the specifics of reopening the borders gradually, of course, but in the long run... it would be nice."

"I thought so too."

Cessilia smiled, a bit happy. She hadn't realized the future Emperor of the Dragon Empire and the current King of the Eastern Kingdom would reach an agreement so easily... but it was true that they had been friends for a while. Ashen hadn't only been close to her during his time in the Empire.

"With our dragons, we could easily visit each other too," smiled Cessilia.

"Speak for yourself," scoffed Tessandra. "I'm in no hurry to go home where my mom can reach me... In fact, I think I'm planning to stay here for a while."

She smiled at Sabael and hugged him, making him a bit embarrassed in front of her cousins. Cessilia chuckled.

"I don't think we have to go home while Grandma is here," she whispered in Ashen's ear.

"...Then I need to make sure Lady Kareen stays a long while."

He smiled back at her, and they exchanged a gentle kiss.

"Get a room!" Tessandra laughed.

"I'm still here," groaned Kassian, glaring at her.

"Yeah, why? Shouldn't you go back and check on Lady Bastat?"

Despite Tessandra's obvious winks, the young Prince didn't get flustered, and simply rolled his eyes. Without answering her teasing, he walked out, although it was only to go speak to their grandmother, Darsan, and the others.

"You shouldn't tease Kassian," Cessilia muttered.

"Oh my dragon, Cessi, you should thank me. This is our one chance to sneak away, come on!"

She grabbed Sabael and suddenly pulled him to run out of the Dorosef residence first. Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a

glance but, after a mischievous smile, they both walked out as well.

Both couples split up without saying a word. Instead, the two cousins exchanged amused glances, before Tessandra

grabbed Sabael's collar to pull him into a narrow street. Cessilia chuckled, amused by her cousin's antics. Meanwhile, Ashen,

who had seen that too, put his arm around her with a faint smile.

"I know one guy that's about to be eaten alive..." he whispered, amused.

"I don't think he minds much."

He nodded in agreement, and they walked away in a different direction, actually going up toward the castle. The two of

them chose to take narrow streets as well, but mostly to avoid drawing attention.

Cessilia did see a couple of citizens notice

their King amongst the people flocking the streets, but she and Ashen were already gone before any could decide to walk up to them. For a while, the two of them walked around without really any purpose. They were simply happy to walk quietly, an arm around each other, witnessing the scenes of Aestara beginning its recovery from the battle. Everywhere they went it was clear that, although it would take time, things would be rebuilt, people would heal and things would go back to normal. Perhaps life would even get much better. Cessilia had never seen so many people from different tribes helping each other but, for once, it truly felt as if the locals didn't care anymore about their differences.

"...Do you think Lady Kareen's here to take you back?" Ashen suddenly asked.

"It sounded more like Grandma plans to stay for a little while."

"Is it alright that we left her there? She already doesn't like me much, now I'm stealing you when she just arrived."

Cessilia chuckled, a bit amused.

"We left her with my brothers and Nana, I'm sure Grandma will be just fine. She most likely just came here because she was curious too. She seldom leaves her own palace... and it's not true that she doesn't like you."

"It did not sound like she did earlier."

"Grandma is the type to tease those she likes the most. Don't worry. She would already have me on the way back if she really didn't like me being with you."

Ashen sighed. That part was true, at least. In the few times he had met her before, it was obvious the Imperial Family's matriarch was quite hard to stop whenever she had decided on something. Still, he couldn't help but feel some uneasiness ever since Cessilia's brothers had showed up. He was worried they'd take her away from him. Surely, she couldn't stay in the Eastern Kingdom forever without ever going back to the Dragon Empire. Even if he knew Cessilia had most likely already made up her mind, he wasn't ready to part with her, even if it was just for an hour...

Their steps naturally took them back to the castle. In fact, they were surprised to cross paths with even more Royal Guards, who had apparently decided to clear and clean the place as soon as possible. They walked up the stairs past the first gates, while many of the Yekara men they had killed earlier were brought out. Those who were injured could be taken and their wounds looked at, but they were handcuffed, and would most likely be kept under heavy watch. There were more dead bodies than people alive being taken out though. In fact, the castle was strangely empty when they arrived at the main doors, and ran into some of the higher-ranked Royal Guards. The men immediately put a knee down once they spotted the King, but no one

stepped forward to talk to him. Instead, it was as if they had understood the King and his lady just needed some privacy. Hence, the duo walked inside unbothered. Despite the destruction she had witnessed from above, Cessilia was surprised to see that the lower floors seemed fine. It would probably take a while before the castle was rebuilt to its former glory, but the damages weren't as bad as she had thought. Some windows had been shattered, and the whole place smelled of rain, but there was already little left of the violent fights they had gone through the last time they walked up those corridors. In fact, some servants were still busy cleaning the blood stains. It was as if everyone was in a hurry to clear all evidence of the rebellion. Not only that, but Cessilia guessed many were eager to show which side they had fought on too. Some of the men escorted by the Royal Guards wore the same uniform as them. It was strange to witness the whole scene when winners and losers looked so alike...

"Where should we go?" Ashen whispered against her ear.

A faint smile appeared on Cessilia's lips. She knew exactly where she wanted to go; They walked up the stairs, holding hands in the narrow corridors, Cessilia walking ahead with a hint of excitement when she found the familiar doors, still standing and completely fine; the floors above were pretty unsafe to visit, but the Cerulean Suite had been spared by the violent dragon's attacks. This whole aisle of the castle had been spared somehow, perhaps because it was right above the sea. Most of the debris coming from above had probably fallen right into the sea without touching these parts... She pushed the doors, finding the room just as she had left it. It was cold, but dry. The wide balcony had done its work in keeping most of the rain outside and falling down to meld with the waves far below. The smell of salt and rain was embalming the whole room.

"I knew you'd like this place," Ashen smiled.

Cessilia turned around to face him, a smile on her lips. In fact, it felt strange to finally be here with Ashen, far enough from everything else that was going on in the Capital. From the Cerulean Suite, they couldn't hear anything but the gentle drip of the rain, and the waves crashing somewhere far below. Perhaps a dragon growl could be heard from afar from time to time too, but except for that, it was just the two of them, completely secluded from the world. "I really do like it."

She slowly stepped back, pulling him toward the bed behind her; Ashen smiled, and followed her obediently. The two of them kept staring at each other lovingly, until Cessilia's legs hit the bed. Then, she turned around, and pushed the King to lay down first, which he did without resisting.

"This bed is comfier than I thought," he chuckled.

"It's quite large too," Cessilia said.

She took off his shoes, then hers, and climbed up on him, careful not to touch his injury.

Ashen noticed, and sighed,

gently putting his hands on her waist.

"I'm fine," he muttered.

"Stop saying that," she retorted.

"Cessilia, I received dragon blood and had a three-hour nap. I may not be as strong as a dragon's daughter but I am not

so fragile either. Can you leave me a bit of my pride as a man, please?"

"...Grandma says male pride is overrated," she chuckled.

"I agree with that, but I still feel a bit bad that my Queen worked so hard to keep her useless King alive."

"You did fine yourself."

She leaned over and, before Ashen could protest, she gently kissed him.

It felt like their lips hadn't met in forever. At least, not in a long while like this. The quick pecks and hurried kisses that

they had stolen that day were nowhere near enough to satiate them. In fact, Ashen

frowned a bit under her lips, suddenly

wanting more of this. His hands were on her skin, and the more he touched, the more

he could feel her silver scales in random

places, testimonies of all the injuries she had received. He hated seeing her hurt, even if he knew she could withstand it. To

think Cessilia's soft skin had to toughen up until it got so rough was making him even more angry at those who had hurt her. He

wished he had been in better health for the fight, and able to send it back ten fold. Still,

she had proven time and time again that

she was stronger than him.

Not only that, but he could feel the change wasn't just physical. Cessilia was dominating him, more assertive with her

lips, her hands, and the whole of her body. Despite the humid chill in the room, her body was anything but cold. In fact, the

more they kept kissing, the hotter the atmosphere became around them. Neither of them could stop, it was as if a spell had taken

over, making them relentlessly thirsty for the other's taste. Ashen tried to sit up, putting an arm around her, but Cessilia

suddenly pushed his chest with her hands.

"Stay down," she muttered, out of breath.

He smiled, and slowly showed her he only wanted to get higher on the bed, so his head could rest against the pillows.

Cessilia let him move, and repositioned herself to straddle his lap. With a wry smile on his lips, Ashen took off the buckles of

the last pieces of armor she was still wearing with dextrous fingers. Cessilia didn't move, looking as if she was quite unsure

about this. He was glad they had already both been half undressed by the events, because his partner was quite reluctant to

move at all...

"...Are you sure?" she muttered.

"I'm alright with staying like this," he smiled.

Cessilia knew he only meant their current position. The sexual tension that arose between them, and the slight cunning

smile on his lips were dead giveaways of his real intentions. Not only that, but they now had very few pieces of clothing left...

Cessilia sighed, still a bit worried. Her green eyes went down on her partner's body. His torso was wrapped in bandages but,

indeed, he already seemed a lot better than he was just hours ago. Moreover, his hands caressing her hips were seriously

making her feel hot, and desirable. His dark eyes on her were sending dangerous signals. She could already feel the heat rising

between their lower abdomens, dangerously close to one another....

"...You stay put," she whispered, her voice a bit raspier than usual.

"Anything my Queen wants."

Cessilia felt embarrassed. Not because she was straddling him and clearly in control, but because all of her earlier

resolve had flown out of the window with just one burning stare from her lover. She wanted him. She hadn't realized how

much she wanted him until minutes ago. Perhaps because they hadn't had any intimate time in a while, she just felt desperate to

have him, here and now. They were finally alone, and the excitement of the fight was dying down, while a more sensual feeling

was rising. As if they needed something more primal to release all that pent up tension.

It was crazy, exciting, and she felt a bit

guilty too. Cessilia began to undo the last pieces of clothing on him, and the excitement rose up further, faster. She could feel

the tension in him, and her body was responding all the same. It was even worse to have Ashen's eyes on her while she alone

got rid of their clothes, and sat back up on his hips. She leaned over to kiss him, but now, most of the heat was coming from

much farther down, where she could feel his manhood caressing her inner thigh. One of Ashen's hands was around her nape,

his fingers playing with her curls, while the other slid in between her legs. Cessilia gasped when he touched her, her whole

body reacting like a sudden trigger. It was as if her own flesh had decided to be much more honest about its desires than she

was. She could feel her insides twitching a bit, and the delicious waves of heat spreading from the places Ashen touched. His

fingers were already quite unbearable. They rubbed, circled, caressed her entry without rest, making her breathe harder

already. When he tried to lift his upper body a bit to get to her, she pushed him back down with her hand, and instead, leaned

over. His lips were as restless as his fingers. Although Cessilia was on top, she was shamelessly indulging in his touch, her

eyes closed and her whole body burning. She loved how he sucked on her breasts... He wasn't leaving any inch of her unblessed by his lips, and she could feel all her extremities liking this. Her fingers grabbed his white hair, with the need to hold on to something.

"Ashen..."

Her voice had never sounded sexier. He smiled, his lips gradually making their way back to hers, while he could feel his fingers already wet enough. Gently, he guided her to sit on him, the two of them groaning when their bodies finally merged.

It felt almost liberating, as if their missing piece was back. Staying like this for a second, they chuckled and hugged before kissing once more, in a more demure way this time.

"...It feels so good," he muttered. "I never want to be away from you again..."

She gently moved to kiss his forehead. She could understand his worries, but they were baseless- Cessilia had no

intention of leaving. She had failed to follow him once already, and she wouldn't let it happen again. She was determined to

stay true to her heart, no matter what, and guilt was no longer holding her back; She planned to stay here for good. With a smile

on her lips, Cessilia interrupted their kiss and sat back on him. They interlaced their fingers, their gazes locked on one another,

and she slowly began moving. She wasn't quite used to these sensations yet, but they felt amazing already. It began with slow

movements, her insides rubbing around him, sending delicious chills through both their bodies. She could see from Ashen's

tortured expression how he was resisting the urge to move more... but Cessilia was determined to remain in charge. Her hand

on his torso to keep him down, she moved unbearably slow, relishing in every single sensation she could get from their bodies.

It felt amazing to be the one on top, dominating the ride, listening to her own body to guide her into those pleasures. Not only

that, but Ashen's hands and gaze on her made her feel like a real queen. She could tell he barely held himself back, and the

subtle movements of his hips couldn't compare to how much he really wanted to move. It came to her though. That desire to

move faster, rub harder, feel hotter, and more, so much more.

"Ha..."

Cessilia accelerated, their breathing becoming faster, speeding up the lascivious ride and the movements of their

bodies. The excitement was filling the room with heat, and she could hear their voices, their groans and moans becoming more

animalistic. She liked it so much. Everything about this, even their tired bodies putting their last bits of strength into this. The

lewd sounds of sex, and Ashen's expressions as she kept moving on him, taking more, up and down, squeezing and rubbing

with pleasure, letting those sensations fill her. It was insane how natural sex felt when she was so inexperienced with it. But because it was Ashen, it was his body, his smell, his sweat, she loved everything about it. His dark eyes that accompanied her in her movements, and the way he kept staring, as obsessed with her as she was with him. He made expressions he only made with her, and his movements were never so clumsy and raw as they were when he was trying to caress her whole body. His groans of pleasure got louder, and his hands were pressing her to move faster on him, his hips trying to keep up and trembling every time she pounded against him. Cessilia could feel that urge coming too. The rubbing inside was driving her crazy, and she kept moving, craving more of those sensations, while a bigger wave was definitely coming from deeper under, making her anticipate that big release she wanted. Ashen grabbed her hips and kept pounding, gasping, unable to stay still any longer. It was now a wild battle between their bodies, neither of them willing to lose, win, or stop. It hit Cessilia first. A violent burst in her lower stomach, making her cry out in relief, almost out of air. Ashen kept pounding, until her squeezing around him triggered his own release just seconds later, with another long groan. The two of them breathed loudly, a bit out of it, just trying to calm down with their trembling bodies. Cessilia could still feel that strange sensation inside, making her not want to move, yet unable to stay still. Ashen's hands took her out of her daze a bit. He gently caressed her cheek, and she found the strength to move, letting him out and slowly falling next to him on the bed. He chuckled, and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer to kiss her forehead. "...I could get used to this," he chuckled, still a bit out of breath. Cessilia pouted a bit, knowing he was teasing her. Still, she felt strangely good, and had finally calmed down. She had enjoyed it, although it was brief. She had put her last bits of strength into this, and now, she could finally rest, wrapped in his arms, Ashen's smell surrounding her. In fact, she didn't have any strength left to move, and happily stayed right there, closing her eyes and putting her cheek against his shoulder. She felt Ashen pull the blanket over them, and fell asleep with his breathing soothing her.