

The White King's Favorite

Chapter 31-32

Chapter 31

A bright ray of light woke her up. Cessilia frowned, bothered by the sudden brightness, and struggled to open an eye.

Right above Ashen's shoulder, the dawning sunlight was reflected on some shiny, ice-like scales. She smiled. Cece was

patiently waiting, those gorgeous ruby eyes riveted on them. Everything in the room was incredibly silent, which was

impressive considering the size of the dragon waiting for her. Cessilia could only hear the calm waves, the gentle breeze, and

even some brave seagulls farther away.

She turned her eyes to the man lying next to her. Ashen was still deep asleep, a little frown on his face. His long white

hair was all over his face and shoulders, a bit messy. She regretted that they hadn't bathed before falling asleep. There was

still dried blood on his hairline, and the sheets were quite dirty... Still, everything felt warm and comfortable around her. She

had slept tightly wrapped in his arms, against his dark and warm skin. She glanced over the injuries she could see from there.

Most were already drying and healing, soon to be thin scars. Cessilia grazed them with the tips of her fingers, feeling a bit sad.

Ashen's body was already covered in so many scars... He didn't even react to her touch, his breathing slow and steady. He

ought to be quite exhausted. She carefully raised her fingertips to caress that frown between his eyes until it disappeared and

his expression relaxed. Truth was, she didn't really want to leave his embrace, but there was somebody else she had missed a

lot.

Careful not to wake him up, Cessilia slipped out of the bed. Giving a quick smile to Cece, she moved to the nearby

basin for a quick wash. Ashen wasn't the only one smelling a bit nasty... The cold water felt good on her skin and on her scales.

Cessilia was surprised to spot some of them were still there. Once she was done cleaning them, they looked even shinier.

Unlike Kian's scales that were of a metal-gray silver, hers and Cece's were more of a subtle blue-ish shade, just like ice. Once

clean, Cessilia walked to the wardrobe to find a new dress. Her previous one had been half torn away, and the remains were

scattered on the floor around the bed... She found one she liked, a gorgeous dark purple one without too many embellishments,

but that fit her well, long and off-the-shoulder. Cessilia realized she was probably going to cover her neck a lot less now. Her

hair was a bit of a mess, but she combed it quickly with her fingers, and braided it as best as she could, figuring she'd ask for Tessa's or Nana's help later.

Then, she finally walked up to the balcony where Cece was patiently waiting for her. The gorgeous dragon growled very softly when Cessilia approached. They were excited to see each other, although

both were careful not to wake Ashen up. Cessilia put her hand forward, her fingers finding the cold, smooth scales of Cece's

snout first. Her dragon nudged gently against her palm, closing its ruby eyes with what almost seemed like relief. Cessilia's

heart felt warm too. They hadn't had enough time to properly reunite. Of course, they didn't really need physical closeness to

feel each other's presence, but she still loved every moment they could spend together.

Gently, she climbed on her dragon, and

Cece moved down, climbing down the balcony in just a few swift movements. The take off was incredibly smooth. Cece had

always had this elegance, rare and impressive for a dragon, with movements as swift as the wind. Cessilia enjoyed the ride as

her dragon slithered away from the castle, climbing up for a morning flight. For once, the Eastern Kingdom was blessed with a

cloud-free sky, the morning sun shining brightly on the horizon. From their height, they could see the gorgeous colors of the

sunrise in shades of warm purple, blushing pink, and vibrant orange melting one into the other like waves. As Cece simply

flew around without any precise destination, Cessilia looked down on Aestara. The Capital was very quiet this morning. All

the smoke from the fires was gone, replaced by a morning mist that came from the docks and wrapped the city in a mysterious,

thin fog. Everyone who had worked hard to put out the fires and rescue the injured were now quietly resting in their own

homes. There were still signs of the battle in the destroyed buildings, wrecked streets, and the few piles of bodies that had

been respectfully covered until something better could be done, but at long last, peace was reigning. Cessilia enjoyed her

privileged tour of the Capital on Cece's back. In fact, she was just happy being able to ride the skies on her own dragon. Cece

was moving slowly, the powerful wings taking them higher or lower in just a couple of flaps. The Silver Dragon only had to

keep them extended to casually float on the morning winds, following the natural streams and lazily flying around.

Another dragon's growl got their attention. They turned their heads, and spotted Kian happily flying right behind them.

The dragon was alone, but visibly enjoying that morning flight with its sibling. Cessilia almost regretted that Dran and the other

dragons weren't here to fly with her Cece. The young dragons had all been the closest since each one was born... Cece had

barely even known Seus, the youngest. Their baby brother was born when Cessilia was twelve, hence Cece had barely got to spend any time with his dragon... Cessilia forced herself to take a deep breath and calm down. At the very least, Cece was back. Now, they would have all the time they wanted to catch up, and do all those things that she had missed having her dragon for over the years. First, this. Yes, something as simple as a morning flight at dawn was a very good start. Cessilia promised herself they'd do this as often as possible, here or in the Dragon Empire. Cece let out one of those unique long screams, echoing in the skies around them, putting a smile on Cessilia's lips. For a while, the trio enjoyed this time together, both dragons playing and fooling around, even racing against each other at times. Although Cessilia had been allowed to ride her brothers' or father's dragons when needed, nothing could compare to flying on her own. She could anticipate each of Cece's movements, and each twist and turn felt as natural as if she had moved one of her own limbs.

"...Cece," she whispered after a while.

The dragon happily growled back, and parted ways with Kian, flying back toward the castle. But Cece didn't head back toward the Cerulean Suite. Instead, the Silver Dragon flew to one of the other flanks of the castle's island, toward one too familiar beach. Landing softly on the sand, both Cessilia and her dragon looked around. The waves had already washed away all traces of the fight they had held there the previous day. In fact, only Jinn remained. The Red Dragon was still there, trapped in the ice, but asleep from exhaustion. Cessilia paid it no attention for now. Although it had melted a bit, the ice was still keeping Jinn captive, so there was no risk.

She turned around, facing Cece once again, on the ground this time. Her dragon's long body was extended behind it, but the head was right in front of Cessilia, those big ruby eyes fixated on her. Cessilia took a deep breath and walked up closer, offering her hands.

"...Good morning," she muttered.

Cece growled softly in response. Cessilia stepped even closer, until she and her dragon were just an inch away from each other. Then, she caressed the silver-scaled snout with her hands and leaned her forehead gently against her dragon's. Both of them closed their eyes together. The relief and gratitude in her heart was beyond any words. Cessilia just felt so blessed to have her dragon back, her Cece right here. It still felt unreal, despite the dragon's large presence. She had this urge to touch the silver scales non-stop, as

if she feared it would all disappear at any moment. But Cece was here to stay, and it was almost as if they had never been apart. It was strange, considering how long they had been separated, and how much both of them had changed, but it was true.

They felt closer than ever, their hearts beating as one. It was as if she was facing her own reflection, her heart and soul taking the appearance of a mythical creature. Cessilia wasn't sure if her heart was really as strong as Cece seemed to be, but she definitely felt like she had taken a leap forward, and she would never go back to her former shell. She felt strong, fierce, confident, and even a bit proud. If anything, she felt at peace with her past. Those burdens and dark shadows from the past weren't weighing on her shoulders anymore. That tight feeling down in her throat was gone... for good.

Suddenly, Cece gave her a little head bump, making Cessilia fall back.

"Hey!"

But her dragon lowered its head, tilting it with its lower rear moving around, moving around playfully. Cessilia's lips opened in a smile, and she rolled on the sand, running to the waves until she could splash Cece. The dragon happily jumped into the fresh seawater with her, fooling around and teasing Cessilia. Obviously, Cece was much bigger than her, and capable of sending her flying, but was careful not to. In fact, the dragon was just like a large dog wary of its owner, pushing Cessilia around with its snout and taunting her to keep playing around; Cessilia wasn't sparing her efforts, sprinkling Cece as much as she could, and diving underwater to play tag with the dragon too. For a while, the two of them played as if they were twelve again, ignoring everything around, laughing and growling in happiness, having fun with the simplest things.

When they both grew tired of their game, they laid on the sand, Cece's large body making a nice seat for Cessilia to rest her back against. The Princess let out a long, tired, but satisfied sigh. They sat facing the rising sun, using its gentle rays of light to dry themselves. Cessilia was glad she could endure the cold water, as most normal humans would have gotten sick from playing in the chilly water. Cece too seemed happy to simply lay around and dry. The ruby eyes were already closed, preparing to nap in the comfy bed of sand.

"Good morning, my darling."

Cessilia opened her eyes, surprised to hear her grandmother's voice. She looked to her right, where the old lady was just climbing off of Krai's back. The Black Dragon immediately jumped to play around with Cece, and before she could even get up, Cessilia was pushed in the sand by the two dragons' unruly playing. Unlike with her, Cece didn't have to show restraint

while playing with Krai, and soon enough, the whole beach became a huge playfield for these two. Despite the age difference, dragons remained dragons, and played all the same. In fact, Cece being a bit bigger than the Black Dragon made it even funnier when they began to chase each other, as poor Krai had to run twice as fast to escape. Cessilia chuckled watching them, and walked up to her grandmother while being cautious of their playing.

"You're up early, Grandmother."

"Of course! I've woken up with the sunrise every day since I was born. Old ladies don't need that much sleep, either."

"You're not old..."

With an amused smile, Cessilia wrapped her arms around her grandmother, hugging her. She had been a bit

embarrassed the previous day, but now, she was happy to have some time alone with Kareen. The older lady hugged her back,

but soon she frowned, and looked at Cessilia's hair with an upset expression.

"What in the world is this?" she exclaimed.

She was holding some of Cessilia's sharply cut hair, the strands she had to cut the previous day, during the fight...

Cessilia grimaced.

"Collateral damage," she muttered.

"Ha! As if I was going to leave you like this. Come over here."

Cessilia didn't even think about asking or protesting, she trusted her grandmother wholly. Lady Kareen made her sit on

the beach, and began rinsing her hair with sea water, clearly determined to clean it and cut it herself. She had taken out a small

dagger too. Because she was turning her back to the sea, Cessilia had Jinn in her direct line of vision. The Red Dragon had

woken up but, intimidated by the two others present on the beach, it didn't dare make a sound, staying still with a sad expression.

"...Grandmother. You said dragons without owners can... survive, right?"

"Yes. I've raised a few myself. When your uncles were murdered, I had to raise their dragons on my own. The last one

passed away just a couple of years after you were born, you wouldn't remember it."

"This dragon... It belonged to a boy that died a long time ago. It survived by staying with his sister, but now, that

woman... she is gone too."

Cessilia glanced to the side. She wasn't surprised that Jisel's body was gone. It had been taken away by the tide...

probably.

"Well, it probably won't live much longer," Kareen said, still busy cleaning and combing her hair. "That brat looks

quite big already for one that lost its owner."

"...I feel sorry for him," Cessilia muttered. "I wish I didn't have to... make it so he was alone again."

"Was the woman good to that dragon?"

"I'm not sure. She wasn't a good person, but... in my heart, I know she wasn't completely bad either."

She felt that dread in her heart, as if she couldn't find real closure about this. In fact, she was almost grateful that Jisel's

body was gone. She was almost sure that the woman was dead, but... she wasn't mad about thinking there was a very, very slim possibility she had survived too.

"No one is either completely good or bad, Cessilia. Humans are too complex for that. Even the kindest soul can feel resentment, and even the worst can feel remorse."

"That woman went through a lot. Things that made her... make terrible choices. I can't help but think..."

"Her circumstances made her the evil woman she became?" her grandmother guessed. Cessilia nodded slightly.

A few seconds passed, and her eyes went back to the Red Dragon stuck in ice. Jinn's eyes were on the seashore, as if

they were looking for something, or someone. She could almost read the dragon's heartache, the questions in those big, sad

eyes. Kareen began cutting her hair, carefully using her blade to even it out.

"To each person their own choices, Cessilia," she said. "If the woman refused to be saved or changed, that was her

own decision. Long before you were born, the Imperial Palace was cut-throat, the most dangerous place in the Empire, yet

many people still lived there. They chose power over security, and often paid for it with their lives. I had to make choices too,

some I might regret at the end of my days. However, I won't blame it on anybody else, they are my own. Your father chose to go

to war and killed many soldiers. Those deaths aren't his responsibility, though. They were foolish to partake in a war they

were bound to lose. If you carry other people's burdens on top of your own, a day will come when you won't be able to step

forward anymore, my darling."

She put the blade aside, gently combing the freshly cut hair, done and satisfied. Kareen moved to help her

granddaughter stand up again. Now facing each other, they held hands. Cessilia found incredible comfort in simply facing her

grandmother like this. Kareen had always been one of the women she looked up to the most, and even now that she had caught

up to her height, she still felt as small as she was as a child when facing her. The older woman smiled, and caressed her

granddaughter's cheek.

"You have your mother's gentle nature," she said. "That's why you still have way too much empathy for others. Did you

offer the woman a chance to redeem herself?"

"...I believe I did."

"Then her demise was her choice and her fate," nodded Kareen. "You cannot save everyone, Cessilia. If you offer someone a choice, and they take the wrong one, no matter how sorry you feel for them, you have to let go. Their burden won't get any lighter because you chose to carry it too. There is no point." Cessilia slowly nodded. She understood her grandmother's words, but in her heart, she knew there would still be a bit of that guilt she would carry for a little while longer. Still, Kareen smiling at her made her feel as if everything would be alright. She nodded, and as her grandmother opened her arms, she happily indulged in hugging her.

"Oh well, I've done what I could with your hair, but you could use a proper bath!" "I will," Cessilia chuckled, stepping back.

As they separated, her eyes fell on Jinn once again. This time, the Red Dragon was staring at the rowdy duo playing not far from the ice rock it was still trapped in. When Cece inadvertently ran too close, Jinn suddenly growled, but Krai immediately growled back, even louder, scaring the Red Dragon into submission. "...What should we do with him?" Cessilia asked her grandmother. "I feel bad, we can't just leave him in the ice until he dies..."

Kareen sighed and crossed her arms. She walked up to the Red Dragon, now circled by Cece and Krai who seemed to be ganging up and growling back at it. For a while, it was a concert of dragon growls until the two women walked into the midst of it.

"Enough!"

One word from Kareen, and all three of them stopped. Krai tilted its head, while Cece's snout shyly nudged Lady Kareen's elbow. The older lady gently caressed the silver scales, but her dark eyes were riveted on Jinn. Funny enough, the Red Dragon seemed even more intimidated by that woman than it was by the other two dragons. Its eyes kept trying to look away, as if pretending to ignore her intense stare.

"...I suppose I could take this brat with me," she finally said. "It's not the first time I'd raise a dragon that isn't of my own blood..."

Cessilia nodded, happy with this resolution. Indeed, Lady Kareen was incredibly good at taming dragons, for someone that didn't have her own... Cessilia had seen her with her uncles' dragons, and all of them were as good as obedient puppies in front of her.

"Krai, baby, free this one for me," she said, "and you."

She suddenly pointed her long index finger at Jinn, the Red Dragon immediately freezing up.

"You better behave," she simply said.

Then, she just turned around and walked away very calmly. Cessilia exchanged a glance with Cece.

"I know," she chuckled. "Grandmother is the best, isn't she?"

"Ashen?"

Cessilia gently woke him up. The King groaned, opening one eye slowly. Upon recognizing his lover leaning over him, he smiled and extended his arms, grabbing and pulling Cessilia onto the bed with him before she could resist. She let out a little gasp of surprise, but fell over him with an amused chuckle.

"Good morning," he smiled, kissing her cheek.

"G-good morning," Cessilia answered, blushing. "Ashen, you shouldn't..."

Her resistance was an adorable tease. He kept hugging her, amused, keeping his eyes closed and imagining her

embarrassed self, although he wasn't quite sure why she seemed so shy that morning.

He kissed her forehead, but Cessilia put her hands on his torso, and sat on the bed.

"Ashen," she muttered.

"Hm?"

He opened his eyes, and finally spotted the third person's tall figure, standing at the end of their bed.

Ashen jumped, sitting straight up in the bed, completely panicked. He had sat up so fast, he felt the injuries both in his back and on his torso painfully stirring in protest. Still, he wouldn't have dared to lie back down. Lady Kareen was standing right there, in person, facing him with her arms crossed and a haughty expression on. Her dark eyes went down, and Ashen followed her gaze, immediately realizing he was naked. He quickly pulled the blanket over his lower half.

"...Morning, Lady Kareen."

"Happy to see you too, young man."

Ashen grimaced, and glanced toward Cessilia, who had a sorry expression on.

"I tried to tell you," she muttered.

He could easily guess she hadn't been given much choice. Lady Kareen was a woman who did not take refusals well...

Embarrassed, he tried to comb his hair out of his face, and gather as much dignity as he could. Next to him, Cessilia was seated on the bed too, an amused smile on her lips.

"As much as I appreciate the view, you should get dressed, young man. I'll take brunch outside."

She then walked to the balcony of the suite, and simply sat on one of the chairs there as if the whole place was hers.

Ashen let out a long sigh, and fell back on the bed, rubbing his eyes.

"Really sorry..."

"I forgot how unpredictable that woman could be," he whispered back. "Anyways... I'll get dressed."

"I'll go try and find us something to eat," chuckled Cessilia.

Luckily, the triplets had left some food in the Cerulean Suite beforehand. Mostly fresh and dried fruits, biscuits, some tea, and Cessilia managed to find some jam too. Ashen also left quickly to go and find some pants, and most surprisingly, came back with some bread, eggs and dried meat.

"I live here, I know where the kitchens are," he chuckled at Cessilia's surprised expression.

In record time, they had managed to gather a half-decent breakfast for the demanding older lady, and place it on the balcony's table before sitting down with her. Ashen's nervousness was written all over his face and, amusingly, he was alternating between avoiding Lady Kareen's eyes and staring at her. Cessilia couldn't help but smile behind her cup of tea. She rarely got to see him so tense and intimidated by someone... However, for a while, Lady Kareen didn't say anything. She only drank and ate quietly, graceful as always, very slowly as if she was truly taking her time with the delicacies. For a long while, no one said a thing, until Cessilia put down her cup.

"Did you have a good evening, Grandmother?"

"Oh, I did. That Dorosef girl is incredibly smart and a great entertainer. I learned a lot more from just a few minutes with her than a whole hour with some older man that kept harassing me. She's a great match for your brother too. I hope they settle down quickly, Darsan needs a kind girl like her to tame him."

"Right?" Cessilia smiled. "Naptunie became our friend right away, she's incredible. And very brave too."

"Her whole tribe is pretty interesting. They offered for me to stay with them, and I might just take them up on their offer.

This place you call a castle is no good! There is not enough light, the stone work is terrible, and those long corridors make no sense!"

Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a surprised look, and not because of Kareen's appraisal of the poor castle.

"Grandmother, you plan to stay here? For how long?"

"As long as it pleases me!" she retorted. "Why not? I'm bored in the Empire, so I might as well take a vacation here.

Unless I'm not welcome?"

She asked that last sentence while staring at Ashen, her thin eyebrows dramatically arched. He smiled nervously.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you wish, Lady Kareen," he said. "I'm just surprised you wish to stay. It will take us weeks to renovate the Capital and clean up the aftermath of the battle..."

"Darling, I've seen way worse than this. In fact, if you plan on having my darling granddaughter and at least one of my grandbabies staying here, I have a few things to say about how you should renovate this pigsty you call a castle; even my

stables get more light than this!"

Ashen nodded helplessly. Cessilia couldn't help but be a bit happy about her grandmother staying for a while. Lady

Kareen was an incredible support, and if she planned to stay, she would definitely whip the staff into shape and get the Capital back to its former glory in half as much time as it should take!

"...At least this room is decent," she nodded.

"I gave Cessilia the best suite in the castle."

"That's good."

It almost felt like he was trying to get his in-laws' approval already. However, Lady

Kareen liked to stay an enigmatic

woman, sipping her tea with very little expression on.

"Grandmother, you saw Father and Mother then?" Cessilia asked. "Are they alright?"

"Almost half their children crossed the border and didn't bother to send any news!"

Kareen exclaimed. "Of course they

are worried! Oh well, it's not like they don't trust you. You know that silly father of yours would have come in person if his

presence wasn't needed in the north... With Kassian and Darsan both gone from their positions, it must be chaos up there, and

your mother's got the younger ones to look after. Moreover, we wouldn't want to cause a diplomatic incident."

"We plan to reopen the border very soon," declared Ashen. "I will reopen the negotiations with the Empress as soon as possible—"

"Fine!"

She suddenly slammed her cup down.

"I will make sure those negotiations go well," Kareen suddenly declared, "and I want to have a residence built in the

outskirts of the city for when I come to visit, at least twice a year. A nice location, not too far from the Capital, with gardens, and plenty of light."

Cessilia almost spat her tea out. So that was her grandmother's real aim after all... to house-hunt and find herself a

secondary residence far from the Imperial Palace. She remembered the epic fights

between Lady Kareen and her daughter,

constantly arguing about her being under surveillance. No wonder she found going on the other side of the border would be the

best way to flee from her daughter!

"Of course, I should have a room here as well," she added, grabbing a new fruit. "A suite akin to this one in terms of

size and decorations would be acceptable."

"Grandmother, the repairs are going to take a while..."

"So what?! Am I not welcome until then?" she protested.

"You can't impose on the Dorosef Tribe for so long," muttered Cessilia. "Moreover, all the families are going to be

busy repairing what was destroyed in the battle, too... How about you stay with us instead?"

"With us?" she repeated, frowning.

Her eyes then turned to Ashen with a serious expression.

"Young man. Do I understand that you plan on having my precious granddaughter remain here?"

"Of course," Ashen retorted. "I have no intention of parting with Cessilia again."

"Really? I heard she came to marry you, so why haven't I heard of any wedding happening yet? You wouldn't possibly be thinking of keeping the War God's precious daughter, the Dragon Empress' niece, and the sister of the future Emperor as a mere concubine, would you?"

"Grandmother!" Cessilia blushed.

However, neither Ashen nor Kareen reacted to her. Instead, the two of them were fiercely staring at each other, the older lady with a smirk on her lips. She was obviously testing the King, and he was not having it.

"No," he muttered, anger in his voice.

"...Cessilia dear, leave us alone."

"What? But—"

"Go and find Tessandra, that child drank way more than she should have last night."

Cessilia wanted to protest some more. The atmosphere between these two did not seem like the conversation about to ensue was going to be pacific at all. In fact, her grandmother asking her to leave made her even more nervous about all this.

They wouldn't fight each other or something, right?

"...Don't worry, Cessilia," muttered Ashen, his eyes riveted on the older lady. "I'll come and find you later, I promise."

This was his own way of saying he could handle the matriarch of the Imperial Family on his own. Cessilia glanced at

the two of them and slowly stood up, still quite nervous about leaving the table.

"Grandmother, please be nice," she muttered.

"Always, darling, always."

Cessilia sighed, but left a quick kiss on her grandmother's cheek, and after one last glance at Ashen, she walked back inside, quickly grabbing a thicker shawl to cover herself with, and left the Cerulean Suite.

She couldn't help but still be nervous while she went down the stairs. Her grandmother was probably here to play the role of proxy in her father's stead, which was even more terrifying... It made sense that the War God couldn't have come himself. Ashen's relationship with her family hadn't been left in the best state, but also the current geopolitical conflict between the two nations went far beyond the King's wishes. Merely reopening the borders for trade would take weeks, if not

months, and it would take far more than that for the trust to be reestablished between the two countries. While she kept walking down the castle's stairs and corridors, Cessilia tried to imagine it. In a few years' time, would the two nations find a common ground? Her brother was going to become the Dragon Emperor some day, probably in just a few years. If she became Ashen's Queen, wouldn't that make it all far easier? Although her heart was hopeful, Cessilia was also educated enough in politics to know not everything would happen soon. She now knew why her grandmother had come, instead of her father or aunt... Walking down and outside the castle, into the fresh morning fog, Cessilia realized the damage done to the castle was worse than everywhere else, which was a rather good thing... Aside from the main streets, most buildings had held well against the attacks. Many doors and windows would have to be repaired, but the stone walls of the houses had remained sturdy. Where the fires had taken place, everything but the houses' structures had gone up in flames. Which meant there was still something to rebuild on... unlike the collapsed parts of the castle. Cessilia glanced back. She had never really liked this castle, except for the Cerulean Suite. Maybe her grandmother was right, and they could rebuild something even better?

"Cessi!"

She turned around, surprised, and found Darsan running up to her. She would have been scared of her older brother's giant figure if she wasn't used to it. He hugged her like a gigantic bear would have, with his big arms circling her.

"Good morning, little sis!"

"Good morning," she chuckled. "What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for Grandma, she wasn't in the room Nana gave her..."

"Oh, I just had breakfast with her, she's... chatting with Ashen."

"Oh! It's all good then. Come on, Nana's sisters are making us a crazy amazing breakfast! Did you know her uncles go to fish before dawn every morning? I heard them waking up this morning and followed them, it was so much fun catching fish!"

Cessilia chuckled. She could see Darsan having fun amongst the fishermen, happy to use his strength for something other than fighting and repairing his mistakes... Grabbing her hand, he took her back to the Dorosef residence. Despite the early hour, it was already quite noisy inside, as expected. The tribe was obviously used to having guests, and right as she stepped in the courtyard, Cessilia was blessed with the delicious and now familiar smell of fresh fish beignets.

"Cessi!"

Tessandra appeared, her mouth stuffed with half a beignet, the other half she offered Cessilia, who happily took it.

"You look tired," chuckled Cessilia.

"I didn't sleep much," her cousin winked at her, "but that was one of the best nights of my life, until that big idiot of your brother decided to make the worst ruckus possible and wake everyone up in the damn house..."

"What, I was getting ready to go fishing!" protested Darsan.

"Your dragon butt face probably scared all the fish away," groaned Tessandra, still bitter about the rude awakening.

"You dragon poop," retorted Darsan.

"Dragon fart."

"Dragon boog—"

"Oh, can you two stop?" Naptunie sighed, appearing behind Tessandra. "That's really disgusting and I just had breakfast too..."

"Morning, Nana."

"Good morning! We have more beignets if you want! Although you might have to wait a bit, I think we're going to distribute them downtown..."

"That's nice, but I already had breakfast with Grandmother."

"Oh, is she alright? Lady Kareen really drank a lot last night..."

"Trust me, Grandmother is a heavyweight," sighed Tessandra. "She's fine. ...Is she around?"

"She's with Ashen," explained Cessilia.

"With the King? Why?"

Cessilia shrugged. She wasn't quite sure either, and although she did have her suspicions, she didn't really want to imagine what they could be discussing at the moment. She'd probably hear about it all later... Tessandra grinned, but didn't say a word.

"Well, what's the plan for today, Nana? I am not handing out fish beignets all day again, I'm warning you."

"Actually, I think we should go back and help with cleaning the streets," sighed Nana.

"Food isn't really an issue, but I

heard some streets are still blocked and a lot of people remain homeless and had to sleep at neighbors' last night..."

"I don't mind working for free," said Tessandra, "but I doubt the neighborhood is going to remain so selfless for long.

People were already struggling before the battle, it's going to be even worse now. And two of the four bridges were destroyed too, it's going to cause a big issue with the trading in and out of the Capital... we're bound to have even more clogging than before."

Suddenly, an idea came to Cessilia's mind. Her green eyes went toward the destroyed parts of the castle, then to the

Capital's outskirts. Perhaps this battle was actually going to be the solution they had been waiting for to get the country going

again...

"Tessa, can you and Darsan go ahead? I have an idea I need to discuss with Lady Bastat and Nana."

Her cousin nodded without asking for another explanation. Tessandra knew Cessilia enough to figure that if she didn't ask her to stay back, she didn't need to. Moreover, she had regained her full strength now.

"See you later, Nana!" Darsan happily waved, before leaving behind Tessandra.

Cessilia chuckled, and turned to Nana, who got even redder, caught waving back.

"Do you like my brother?" she asked.

"W-well, Sir Darsan is really quite nice..."

"He is," Cessilia nodded, without teasing her any further.

"What did you want to talk to me and Lady Bastat about?"

"Do you know where we can find her first?"

Nana nodded, and guided her outside, just a couple of streets away. There, Bastat was busy chatting with another man

from her tribe, arguing about some fabric she had in her hands. When she spotted

Cessilia and Nana coming toward her, she

frowned, and dismissed him with a sigh.

"Everything alright?" Cessilia asked.

"I wish my father was here," murmured Bastat. "My tribe is a bit restless with everything going on, and they have a

hard time relying on me so fast... but I can't bother you with that. Is there anything you need?"

Nana turned to Cessilia, a bit curious to know as well. The Princess took a deep breath, and nodded.

"I think we need to build a city," she said.

The two young women exchanged a glance, confused.

"A city? How so...? Aren't we supposed to rebuild the Capital first?"

"I think we need to rebuild the Capital and build a new city at the same time," said

Cessilia. "This morning, I had

breakfast with my grandmother, and she gave me an idea. She wants to build herself a palace here."

"A palace?" exclaimed Nana, shocked.

"Yes, but there is literally no space left in the Capital to build more, right? So,

Grandmother will have to build her

secondary residence outside, farther than the Outer Capital. ...What if we used this opportunity to create a new city?"

"But, building a whole city will require a lot of funds," muttered Bastat, "and workers..."

"If we provide jobs, people will come," said Cessilia, confident. "My grandmother has a lot of money, she could pay

forward for her residence, so the workers would be able to be paid for building it! But what if we applied this to a whole city?

We can create jobs and get people to settle. It would reduce the traffic into the Capital and provide new opportunities to

everyone who was trying to get there!"

“...That would be great,” muttered Nana, “but how... I mean, where will we find that amount of money to build an entire city?”

“Even with requesting the cost for the repairs and damages be paid by the Yekara, I doubt that will be enough,” nodded Bastat.

“My grandmother can easily pay forward for her palace,” said Cessilia. “What if we asked the Dragon Empire, my aunt the Empress, to lend the money for the new city?”

“You want the Kingdom to take out a loan?!”

“We are going to reestablish trade between the two countries,” smiled Cessilia. “What better way to reopen communications than a mutually beneficial deal between them?” Nana’s jaw dropped.

“That’s...” sighed Lady Bastat. “I can see your goal, but would that really work? I mean, for a deal to be mutually beneficial, we need to give something to the Dragon Empire, what could that be?”

“The Dragon Empire’s capital is starting to have an overpopulation issue,” explained Cessilia. “Not only that, but there are many crafts and domains which haven’t evolved in a long time as well. Reopening trade between the two nations would be a big opportunity for the Dragon Empire to improve its own economy. Many merchants and artisans could move between the two nations. Moreover, that loan isn’t much for the Dragon Empire, but if the Eastern Kingdom caught up in terms of economy...”

“It would spare them a future financial crisis,” nodded Naptunie. “In the past, there were many cases in which the Empire or the Kingdom’s economy was improved simply by introducing new trades. Moreover, an economy doing too well for too long isn’t good either, it creates stagnation which is bound to collapse at the first crisis!”

“...As educated as I am in trade,” muttered Bastat, “I’m afraid I don’t follow...”

“It’s like two pots of water,” explained Nana. “If water keeps being poured into only one, it will eventually overflow.

But if instead, that pot shares the water it receives into another pot, an empty one, it will last longer before it overflows!”

“That sounds awfully simple, but I understand what you mean, I think...”

“The idea is simply to use that loan,” said Cessilia. “This way, the Dragon Empire gets new opportunities of trade and for our commerce to get to a new era, sharing both countries’ knowledge, while the Eastern Kingdom gets back on its feet. If the two nations are bound to trade, it is even better if they can do so on an equal footing. Moreover, if the Eastern Kingdom accelerates its growth, we will reduce the issues at the border, and the whole Kingdom will flourish and be on par with the

Dragon Empire even sooner.”

“Now that sounds great,” nodded Lady Bastat, “but how do we guarantee the idea will please the Empress? We’re talking about a huge loan...”

“That’s why I think we should come up with the best artisans to convince her... the best merchants and the brightest minds.”

Cessilia smiled, and the two young women suddenly understood.

“You want us to represent the Kingdom!” exclaimed Nana.

“Nana, you’re the smartest person I have ever met,” smiled Cessilia. “You should become a Royal Advisor, not just stay hidden in a library... and you, Lady Bastat, have incredible talent for trade as well. I have no doubt you can pick the finest merchants and create a Merchant’s Guild that could rival that of the Dragon Empire!”

“...Will His Majesty agree to this?” frowned Bastat.

“I think it might be the best way to rebuild the Council of the Lords,” she nodded. “The Lords will have to change, and instead, we need to find ways to represent everyone in the Kingdom, not just the strongest clans or tribes. This should start with every trade, every line of work being represented.”

“I like the sound of that,” nodded Nana. “I’m sure I can convince Uncle Mino and the Dorosef Tribe Leader!”

“I’ll need to discuss it with our merchants and artisans,” said Bastat, “but I have high hopes, too...”

Cessilia chuckled, pleased to see the two capable young women agree to her plan.

“We still have time,” she said. “For now, the repairs and sorting out the aftermath of the battlefield will probably take us quite a while, but I think the castle and the outskirts will both need to be rebuilt next, and by capable architects... I’m sure you two already know names of people who could help with that. Can I ask you to get a headstart on this? Then we can put our plan in motion as soon as this battle is really behind us.”

The two young women nodded immediately, and Naptunie’s eyes were literally shining with excitement. Cessilia knew

those two would be more than capable and up to the task.

“Alright then, I will go and meet with the Cheshi Clan, see how we’re doing for now,” she smiled.

“Oh, Lady Aglithia was also looking for you,” said Nana. “I think it’s about the prisoners...”

“I’ll go and see her then. Thanks for the beignets, Nana!”

“Always!” the young girl chuckled.

The three of them parted ways, Nana and Bastat heading downtown in the same direction Tessandra and Darsan had taken before. Meanwhile, Cessilia turned around, heading to the Cheshi’s main residence to find Aglithia.

“Cessilia.”

She turned around, surprised to see her older brother appearing. Not only that, but Kassian was wearing a thicker coat too, looking ready for a journey. Cessilia walked up to him, curious. He hugged her quietly as a greeting, and she could smell he had been given some of the delicious Dorosef signature breakfast.

"Good morning, big brother. ...What's going on?"

"I'm going to fly home this morning."

"What? ...Already?"

He chuckled and nodded, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"You've been gone for a while already, and our parents probably need to hear you're alright. And now that

Grandmother's here, our aunt might be bothered as well. I'm just going to tell them everyone's alright, and take Krai home too.

We left our dad with only Dran, not the best combo..."

Cessilia nodded. Indeed, now that Kassian was mentioning it, she was just realizing several days had passed already since she had left their home. Moreover, even if her parents knew Cece was back and the dragons were fine, it couldn't match up to an actual explanation. She felt a bit guilty for not realizing how many days had passed since their parents had last heard from her... She had never been away from both of them for so long either. Because of her parents' respective duties, she was used to traveling from one of their familial residences to another, or to her grandmother's, but with their dragons, it only took a few hours for the longest ones. Not only that, but Cessilia thought about her younger siblings too.

"I hadn't realized," she muttered. "It's been over a week already..."

"It's alright," Kassian chuckled. "Don't fret over it. You, Darsan, and I are already adults, they wouldn't have allowed you here if they didn't trust you. Plus, Kiera has disappeared for longer than that once or twice..."

Cessilia smiled at the mention of her infamous runaway sister. She knew Kassian wasn't meaning to make her feel guilty, but she did owe a bit of an explanation to their parents, and to return Krai to her father too. Although she was a bit sad for him to leave, she knew they'd see each other again soon enough.

"So you'll tell them about Ashen?" she tilted her head.

"I'll have to. He's the main reason Father couldn't really come... I may have made peace with him, but it's not exactly like they parted on good terms."

This time, Cessilia was the one to smile.

"Tell them I'll come back home soon... with Ashen and Cece."

"I guess we can consider the Eastern Kingdom's skies as reopened to our dragons then."

"Careful what you wish for!" exclaimed a familiar voice behind them.

They both turned around to see Lady Kareen coming down the road, elegant as always. Surprisingly, she was able to walk with her high heels on the more than bumpy road as if it had been perfectly flat. She walked up to the two of them, her arms crossed, and her shoulders covered with a thick fur cape to protect herself from the cold.

"Grandmother," said Kassian, surprised to see her. "...I was wondering where you'd been."

"Since when do I have to report to you?" she shrugged.

"You drank a lot last night," he said, "...on purpose and despite us trying to stop you.

And this morning, you were gone

already. Were you trying to elude us?"

"Oh, leave an old lady to have some fun!" she slapped his shoulder. "Don't be so uptight, I hate that I am old enough for my grandchildren to be the ones to scold me!"

Cessilia chuckled. Indeed, their temperamental matriarch was never one to follow the rules.

"Anyways, don't tell your siblings about them being allowed to visit," she said. "Before you know it, there'll be half a dozen brats sent here on a field trip!"

"You mean you don't want them to come here because you want to be able to drink," laughed Kassian.

"Exactly! How can I have any peace when everyone keeps using me to babysit their brats?!"

Cessilia and Kassian exchanged a glance. Of course, they knew the regular trips from all members of the family to their

grandmother's Diamond Palace was more to look after her than for her to look after them. Not only their siblings, but all their

cousins also liked to go to the Diamond Palace to escape their parents' scrutiny and spend time with their more lax

grandmother. Despite Kassian, Cessilia, and their siblings being the only grandchildren blood-related to her, there was a silent

agreement that any child of the Imperial Family regarded Lady Kareen as their grandmother. Thus, they all took turns visiting

Kareen in her palace, well aware she didn't enjoy being alone as much as she pretended to...

"You can't hide here forever," sighed Kassian. "Aunt Shareen will be upset if you stay too long."

"Ha! Since when did she care about me? I'd rather stay here just to piss her off!"

Cessilia chuckled. The feud between the Empress and her mother was almost legendary. Now it sounded like the main

reason for Lady Kareen to be here was to be away from her daughter's watch... Cessilia and Kassian exchanged a quick

glance.

"You can stay here as long as you want, Grandmother," smiled Cessilia.

"I still have to report to Aunt Shareen what happened," added Kassian. "I'll probably come back soon, unless they send somebody else."

"I will probably go home to see them soon, actually," his sister declared.

"Really?"

Cessilia nodded.

"We have a few ideas. I know Aunt Shareen will probably already be inclined to the idea, but tell her the King plans to reopen the border and establish new trades. I will come soon, with at least two envoys. ...That includes Lady Bastat."

She tried to see if her brother would react to the name, but Kassian remained calm and stoic as usual, only giving her a brief nod. He then turned to their grandmother once more.

"I'm going to take Roun back too."

"What! Why?"

"I'm pretty sure you did not ask Uncle before taking him. And Tessandra's disappearance might go unnoticed for a few days but a missing dragon is a bit much, Grandmother."

"Ha! See, this is why I prefer Darsan!"

Cessilia chuckled. Still, completely ignoring her words, Kassian placed a quick kiss on their grandmother's hand, and exchanged a quick nod with his sister before leaving. She watched Kassian go and disappear down the road. Next to her, Kareen sighed.

"That kid. He's always been way too serious."

"He's feeling a lot of responsibility as the next Emperor," Cessilia nodded. "I wish he'd be a bit more honest about his feelings. I am sure he and Lady Bastat would be a good match."

"Leave him be," shrugged the old woman. "He might be the heir to the Golden Throne, but he's your father's son before the Empress' heir. If he's anything like your father, he'll come along. And we both know he is."

"And... where is Ashen?"

Cessilia turned to her grandmother, raising an eyebrow. She was pretty sure she had left her grandmother with him just minutes ago, so why did only the old lady come out of the castle? However, Lady Kareen shrugged, looking unbothered as always.

"How would I know?" she said. "He's a King, he has to be busy with something. What about you, my darling?"

"I was on my way to visit the Cheshi Clan... Actually, Grandmother, you should probably come too. I have a few questions for them, but you're the one who knows dragons best in the Dragon Empire." Lady Kareen tilted her head, intrigued.

"They are an old clan," Cessilia quickly explained. "Somehow related to Mom's native tribe..."

"Yes," sighed Kareen. "Your brother sort of explained it to me, although I am still quite interested by all this. What does it have to do with me, though?"

"You're the one who knows the most about dragons in our family..."

"I don't know much, Cessilia. I know what I learned from raising a bunch of those scaled pets."

"But Grandfather told you a lot too, didn't he?"

Kareen's expression slightly changed. Cessilia knew her late grandfather was a sensitive topic in the family. For most of the Dragon Empire, he was the former Emperor, but to Cessilia, he was a grandfather she had never met, and Kareen's former lover. The subject was almost taboo within the family, but over the years, Cessilia had gathered some pieces. She suspected a lot of Lady Kareen's incredible dragon taming despite not being a dragon owner herself was related to her late grandfather... and perhaps some more secrets.

"Cessilia, what is this really about?" Kareen frowned, crossing her arms once again.

"...I want to know what truly happened to Cece."

Her grandmother looked surprised, but for Cessilia, the question had been pending ever since her dragon's return. She

loved her dragon and she was overjoyed that Cece was back, but she still needed to find out how that miracle had been made

possible. Everything she had already learned from the Cheshi seemed like the beginning of an explanation, but Cessilia had a

feeling the rest of that explanation might come from none other than her enigmatic grandmother herself.

After a while, a faint smile appeared on her grandmother's lips.

"You truly are your mother's daughter... Alright, I shall meet those Cheshi you and Kassian bothered me about. I'm

curious to see what they think they know better than the Dragon Empire itself."

Cessilia smiled and nodded. Kareen grabbed her granddaughter's arm for her to lead, but before they could walk more

than just a few steps, she suddenly heard someone calling her name from farther behind them.

"Cessilia!" he called again.

"Ashen!"

"Damn it," grumbled her grandmother.

Ignoring her, Cessilia walked up to Ashen, surprised to see him already. The King had visibly rushed from the castle, a

bit out of breath, to catch up with them. He was just as she had left him that morning, except that he was now fully dressed,

without any armor this time. He had only his sword on his belt, and a hooded cloak hiding most of his figure. Cessilia was a bit

surprised by the hood, wondering if he intended to hide himself from his citizens.

"Grandmother said you were busy," said Cessilia, sending a suspicious glance toward her grandmother.

"Did she? I'm sure I said I'd be ready soon, Lady Kareen," sighed Ashen.

This was getting more and more suspicious, especially the way her grandmother was trying to act all innocent.

Suddenly, Ashen took off his hood, and Cessilia's jaw dropped. She finally understood why Lady Kareen had acted so suspicious.

He had cut his white hair short!

"Ashen!" Cessilia exclaimed, shocked.

She walked up to him, completely taken by surprise. His long white hair was gone. He now had a sharp cut on the

sides, and just a couple of inches of white hair on top and behind his head. Strangely, the simple but radical haircut changed his

overall appearance drastically. He strangely somehow seemed taller, and even a bit younger. Cessilia caressed the side of his

head, surprised that the short hair felt like a soft brush under her fingertips. She bit her lower lip, a bit excited. It was like discovering a new Ashen...

"Grandmother!" she exclaimed, turning to the old woman, a bit annoyed. "That's too much!"

"What?" shrugged the lady. "I merely gave your man a couple of suggestions, I didn't do anything!"

Cessilia kept glaring at her grandmother, annoyed. She could bet her grandmother's suggestions had hit a nerve for

Ashen to do such a thing... She turned back to him.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

"Don't worry," he laughed. "I'll survive. Moreover, I do feel lighter. ...Do you like it?"

Cessilia blushed and nodded shyly. In fact, she was surprised by how much she liked it. She caressed his hair some

more, pretending to play with the new length, well aware of Ashen's amused eyes on her. He had clearly done this all by

himself and quite quickly. Probably with a sharp blade from something like a dagger, judging by the slightly uneven length in

some parts. Perhaps he'd let her even it out later... but she also liked it a bit messy.

"...I think I like it a lot," she whispered.

He smiled and gently kissed her, Cessilia answering the quick kiss with delight. He had even shaved his beard, leaving

his chin and cheeks completely smooth. There was a fresh thin cut on his chin already healing by itself.

"Children," said Kareen, sounding a bit annoyed, "I'm still here. Literally, right here."

"...Thank you for the suggestion, Grandmother," chuckled Cessilia, slowly parting from him. "I like it."

She took Ashen's hand, while Kareen put on a little amused smile.

"See? Your grandmother's always right."

"From now on, I'd like it if you didn't push your opinions on my love though, Grandmother," Cessilia frowned.

Ashen chuckled, amused to hear Cessilia come to his defense, and put a quick kiss on her forehead.

"Where were you two headed?"

"The Cheshi Clan's residence," Cessilia explained, resuming their walk. "Apparently, Aglithia asked for me... I figured I'd bring Grandmother too."

Ashen nodded and followed her. Cessilia wondered if it would be alright for him to visit his mother's birth tribe.

Despite knowing of her origins, he actually hadn't been on good terms with the Cheshi for a long while now... This would be

the first time he interacted so closely with that clan. They had remained out of sight when he was a child, and mostly ignored

him as a King. For them to have changed their position for the war might not be enough to erase their difficult past with

Ashen...

Still, he didn't say anything for the whole trip, but didn't look annoyed or reluctant to go either. Cessilia had become

better at deciphering his expressions, and she could tell he was completely fine. If anything, he seemed happy to spend more

time with her. Their fingers remained interlaced for the entire time they walked to the Cheshi residence.

When they finally got there, Lady Kareen frowned, and raised her eyes toward the door.

"...That's it?" she asked.

Cessilia nodded, and before she could add anything, the doors slowly opened. Aglithia stepped out, and was surprised

to see the two extra guests accompanying Cessilia. She quickly hid her surprise though and bowed politely to the two of them.

"Your Majesty, Lady Kareen, it's an honor."

"...You know who I am?" Kareen raised an eyebrow.

"Of course. We have eyes and ears everywhere."

"Ha," scoffed the older lady. "...My kind of people."

Cessilia smiled. Indeed, it was exactly like her grandmother. Even years and years after the last battle in the Dragon

Empire, she still had spies in every noble and Imperial residence, so that even while visiting once in a while, no one could

hide anything from her. The Cheshi were probably no stranger to those kinds of practices either... Cessilia wouldn't have even

been surprised if they'd been followed all along.

"Please, do come in," said Aglithia. "We have some tea ready. It's a good thing you came, Your Majesty, we have

already interrogated quite a number of prisoners."

"The invitation got lost then," grumbled Ashen.

Cessilia grimaced. So maybe not everything was forgiven yet, after all... but Ashen was right. Even though those were

his prisoners, Aglithia had looked for her, not for the King himself. It probably wasn't out of shyness either. Aglithia pretended

not to hear that.

"My granddaughter mentioned that you and your people have interesting knowledge about dragons," said Kareen, with a mighty tone in her voice. "I'm curious to hear what you pretend to know better than our family."

"Oh, we are not that arrogant, my lady! But, our clan takes its pride in centuries-old knowledge which we have preciousely kept and studied relentlessly... I do have something to show you, if you'd like. As Lady Cessilia's grandmother, it's only right for you to see it too."

"The prisoners first," said Ashen. "I don't care much for your legends, I need to sort out what to do with our war prisoners and the Yekara Clan."

Aglithia nodded.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Just as we suspected, a lot of the Yekara tried to commit suicide before we could interrogate them, but luckily, we managed to stop most before they took their own lives. We lost a dozen this way, but all the others have stopped trying. All the men who weren't part of the Yekara Clan to begin with were, as we expected, either hired mercenaries, former survivors of the Kunu Tribe, or random bandits. All of them were promised they'd be able to loot after the battle and take what they wanted, but from what information we have gathered, it is more likely that the Yekara had planned to get rid of their allies right after the battle."

"Where are they now?"

"We decided to detain most of them in our fortresses, and some are still held by the Royal Guards that remained loyal to you, Your Majesty. What do you intend to do with them...?"

Ashen remained silent. It was clear that was no light question, Aglithia's eyes were scrutinizing him. Cessilia could also tell: whatever Ashen planned to do with the survivors would have long-term consequences on the future of the Kingdom. If he was too lenient, he'd be taken as a weak leader, and expose himself to more attacks in the future. On the contrary, if he was too cruel in his punishment, he would be considered a tyrant no matter how hard he had worked to improve his image. It was truly a difficult choice...

"It's going to take a while," he suddenly muttered.

"A while?" Aglithia seemed surprised.

"The Kunu have already betrayed me twice," he said. "I won't give them another chance. Those who were captured will be executed."

"...Understood. What about the others?"

Cessilia couldn't help but be a bit upset at Aglithia. Although she would obey his orders right away, it was clear the

Cheshi were still testing their King. She had hoped they would have already made up their minds after all this.

"The Yekara will pay their debt as war prisoners," Ashen declared. "They have caused a lot of damage to the citizens' homes and our Capital's streets. They will be forced to work and repair everything, and the clan's money and goods will be confiscated to pay for all the repairs, including some compensation money for those who have lost their family members in the battle."

This time, Aglithia seemed genuinely surprised. Cessilia glanced toward her grandmother, but Kareen had a faint smile on, one of those smirks that meant she was content with Ashen's decision. In fact, even without confirming with her, Cessilia would have thought his suggestion was good too. Moreover, judging from what Aglithia had said, there would be Yekara who would commit suicide either way. For them to choose death was not the King's concern, and their suicides would not stain his honor nor make any citizen cry for them. In fact, having them repair the damages was a far better way to punish them. Even once all the repairs were done, their clan would be ruined, and its members considered traitors. It was truly the end of that clan, a downfall they had paved for themselves.

"...I think that's a good idea, Your Majesty," finally said Aglithia. "May I ask why you said it would take a while, though?"

Ashen suddenly glanced toward Cessilia, a bit enigmatically, before turning back to the Cheshi woman.

"The mercenaries were mostly chosen amongst men that were out of jobs, desperate. Many of those we thought had little to no experience with sword fighting. I want all of them to be interrogated one by one. It is unlikely they will also try to commit suicide, so I want their trials to be held fairly. ...As their King, I want to hear each of their stories. How they came to this, how they will redeem themselves, and what is their better alternative. The state of our Kingdom is partially at fault for pushing those men to risk their lives in a fight that wasn't theirs. I want to hear it all." Cessilia was genuinely impressed. So he had listened to her plea, and was willing to go that far to listen to those men.

Most leaders would have simply gotten rid of them, or treated them like the others, as war prisoners and criminals. Yet, Ashen was taking a different approach. He wasn't only going to hear those men, he was going to listen to the troubles his people were facing, to their hopes for the future, and to all the difficulties that were still blocking their way. It was a lot more than what he would have allowed just weeks ago.

“...With all due respect, Your Majesty, what are we supposed to do with those men in the meantime? The Cheshi can provide prisons to hold them, but we won’t feed prisoners with our own money, and if all of the Yekara’s goes to the repairs—”

“I will take care of that,” announced Kareen.

They all turned their eyes toward her, surprised. However, the matriarch already had a sneaky smile on her lips.

“Why not?” she scoffed. “Young man, I will need men to build my palace here, will I not? You just need to save a few necks, and they will work for me.”

“You’re not to dispose of war prisoners as you please, Lady Kareen,” sighed Ashen.

“This is my Kingdom’s matter.”

“I’m being more than generous to offer to feed a bunch of ruffians,” she retorted. “Didn’t you mention most of those

people were desperate for a job? I want my palace, I will have it, and I will need servants, guards, and workers for that. I am

just making a headstart and a small investment for my own future ambition. Consider this as indulging an old lady.”

Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a look. They both knew this had little to do with Kareen’s desire for her future

residence. The cunning old woman was actually offering to lessen one of their burdens for them. Ashen wanted to rely on the

Cheshi as little as possible, but the current state of the Kingdom was such that no one else would be able to pay for food for so

many criminals while they were waiting to be judged individually. Ashen would have probably saved a lot by simply executing

them all, but the young King was choosing the harder path. And Lady Kareen had just offered him the help he needed to keep up

with that. It might have been a bit of a stain on his pride, but accepting the older woman’s financial help was a better

alternative than requesting that money from any other family. For now, Ashen wouldn’t be able to accept any tribe or clan’s

help. If they were planning to reform the Kingdom, they couldn’t give too much power to one of the tribes by owing a debt.

“...Fine,” he finally muttered. “Then those prisoners will repay their debt toward Lady Kareen for their food and

clothing after their sentence has been decided. They will work for the lady as compensation for as long as it takes for their debt

to be settled. Is that alright with you?”

Aglithia nodded, visibly impressed. Thanks to Lady Kareen, the King had solved two problems already. Not only

would he be free from any debt toward Kareen if the prisoners repaid their food by working for her, but that would also

provide those men with jobs as soon as their trials were over. Cessilia smiled, glancing toward her grandmother, who

responded with a little wink. She did like Ashen after all...

"Understood, Your Majesty," said Aglithia, bowing to him. It definitely felt like something had changed between them. Aglithia was now acting much more respectful of her King, acting more cautious too. She glanced quickly toward Kareen, but the tall lady was simply standing still, her attitude the same as earlier. It was as if she confirmed the person who deserved the utmost respect in the room wasn't her. Then, Aglithia turned to Ashen once more.

"I'll relay Your Majesty's orders, and we will immediately start with the executions. I need to inform Your Majesty, the Royal Guards also insisted on taking care of the traitors amongst them. They are holding those that were arrested elsewhere."

"That's fine by me, I'll settle that with them later."

Cessilia realized she hadn't seen Sabael much since the battle had begun. She hoped Nana's older brother would help

Ashen sort his former comrades' fate as well. Having traitors amongst the Royal Guards was one of the most obvious confirmations that this Kingdom needed deep changes...

Aglithia nodded once again, and finally turned around, leading them farther into the depths of their residence. It was now a familiar corridor to Cessilia, although it was less busy than before. She could guess many of the Cheshi were already preoccupied with the prisoners, tracking the last enemies of the King, or resting after the long battle. In fact, it was so quiet that their steps echoed in the patios they crossed. Finally, they entered that one specific prayer room. Aglithia slowly opened the door, revealing to the trio the mosaic of the two dragons. Cessilia had already seen it, so she was more curious about her grandmother's reaction to it. To her surprise, Kareen hardly seemed surprised.

"...Is that it?" she muttered, glancing toward Aglithia.

"Of course not! But this mosaic is our most precious piece, and to us, also a priceless symbol of our loyalty to the Dragon Masters. The legend behind that mosaic is one we have transmitted for generations..."

Aglithia went on to share with Kareen and Ashen exactly the same tale as her grandmother had given Cessilia and the others not that long ago. It was exactly the same tale, word for word, so precise that Cessilia realized the Cheshi actually knew it all by heart. It was probably their way of ensuring the story would be kept intact over the years... When Aglithia was done, she glanced toward Kareen, expecting a reaction.

However, the old lady had her eyes riveted on the mosaic, with an almost bored expression. For a few seconds, no one said a word, and Kareen kept staring at the duo of dragons, her arms crossed.

"Is that it?" she asked again with a smile on her lips.

"You... don't look surprised," said Aglithia, slightly upset.

"Darling, studying dragons from outdated legends and books is one thing..."

Kareen slowly walked up to the mosaic, and raised her fingers to caress the obsidian scales of the Black Dragon, that amused smile still on her lips.

"...But you children will never truly know what dragons are."

"Dragons are gods!" protested Aglithia.

"Dragons are like men," retorted Kareen. "Each one is different, each one has their own story. You can worship a gutter rat like a god, it won't make it one. Men created such legends to reassure themselves of their power over dragons. If we know them enough, we can control them."

"We do not seek to control them!"

"Then why are you hiding in a bloody basement and clinging on to my grandchildren?" retorted Kareen. "I heard how

you acted while your King struggled to keep this Kingdom afloat. You are nothing like Dragon Masters. You're like those

politicians hiding themselves behind grand speeches and never lifting a finger. Keep polishing that mosaic, child. That's as

close to understanding dragons as your clan will ever get!"

Leaving a completely baffled Aglithia standing there, Kareen sent one last disdainful glance toward the room and

walked out, standing as tall and mighty as an empress. Cessilia hesitated before following her grandmother outside, Ashen right behind her.

"Weren't you a bit harsh, Grandmother...?"

"So what?" she scoffed. "It's not like I owe those people anything. Moreover, I despise those kinds of schemers.

People living off dragons' scraps like vermin... acting almighty when they know nothing. I know exactly what their kind is. Too

weak to act, like dogs barking only when their master's around. The Imperial Palace used to be infested with those. Leave them be."

Cessilia couldn't help but think this had still gone horribly wrong... and her grandmother probably would never get

along with the Cheshi people from there on. Both sides were remarkably stubborn.

Suddenly, while walking back into one of

the residence's patios, they spotted none other than the Cheshi Clan Leader walking alone. Kareen didn't even seem to notice

the man and kept walking ahead, but behind Cessilia, Ashen froze. She glanced back.

The King's eyes on the Clan Leader

standing on the other side of the patio were full of mixed emotions. Anger, defiance, uncertainty. She couldn't even decipher

them all. Still, he didn't say anything, his jawline looking tense. The man he was glaring at had a similar expression. It wasn't

so full of animosity, but both men were staring at each other, gauging each other, with a palpable tension in the air. Ashen's

hand around Cessilia's tightened a bit.

"Lord Marau," he hissed.

So he knew the man's name, after all. Lord Marau was completely still, his gaze also riveted on Ashen. Those two definitely had some unresolved issues... and they would have to resolve them someday, for the sake of the Kingdom. While Cessilia somehow got along with Aglithia, and the Cheshi Clan seemed to have made its peace with the King, Ashen hadn't really made peace with them yet. After a few more seconds of silence, Cessilia glanced ahead, but her grandmother was already out of sight.

"...Ashen?" she finally muttered.

"Go with Lady Kareen," he finally said. "I'll find you later."

Cessilia glanced at Aglithia's father, a bit worried. Would that really be alright? At least both men didn't look like they were about to jump at each other's throats. Still, Ashen had quite the temper... Cessilia let out a faint sigh. After all, he was the King. He could handle this without her. She put a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Play nice," she whispered.

"I'll try."

She then walked out, glancing one last time at Lord Marau. She wondered what that man would have to say to his former fiancé's son... Whatever it was, Cessilia knew it wasn't her place to intervene. As close as she was to Ashen, she knew he had his own demons to overcome, and a complicated past she wasn't a part of. Leaving Ashen behind, Cessilia had to accelerate her pace a bit to catch up with her grandmother. Kareen was actually already back outside the residence, arms crossed, staring at the locals who were starting their tasks for the day. Many of them seemed intrigued by the burgundy-haired woman, sending her curious glances, although they didn't dare approach her. Either Kareen intimidated them or because she was standing in front of the enigmatic Cheshi residence, no locals were brave enough to do more than steal a few glances in her direction. Cessilia joined her, a faint smile on her lips.

"You're getting some attention, Grandmother."

"Don't I always?"

A smile on Cessilia's lips widened. It seemed to be her grandmother's curse: always admired, always envied, but always alone... At the very least, her family always stuck around, no matter how much she feigned complaining about it.

Cessilia took her grandmother's arm, guiding her through the streets. For a little while, the two women gently paced side by side, touring the busy streets and gathering more attention.

"...Why were you so mad? About the Cheshi?" Cessilia finally asked.

"Did I seem mad?"

"To your granddaughter who knows you well, yes. A bit."

Kareen chuckled.

"That's my granddaughter for you, so perceptive. ...Yes, I am slightly upset. It's not against them. I simply can't stand

that such people are still alive, even so far from the Imperial Palace."

"What do you mean?"

Kareen let out a faint sigh.

"I refused for the longest time to live in the Imperial Palace. Your grandfather, that silly man, tried to coerce me by any means, but as you know, he never got the last word. My main reason was to protect my children from political intrigues, assassins, and wretched schemers. Don't let yourself be fooled by these people, Cessilia. They might be on your side because you're a daughter of the Dragon Empire, a dragon owner, but people born and raised in the shadows will always belong to the dark. How many people do you think they are ready to let die for their own pride? They barely acknowledged your King, from what I heard and saw. Ashen is right not to rely on those kinds of clans too heavily. That boy might be too self-centered, but at least he's got good instincts."

Cessilia thought of Ashen's mother. That woman probably was as headstrong as her grandmother, from her understanding. She had left her clan and gone through many hardships to raise her sons the way she wanted to. In the end, was the sacrifice worth it? ...Perhaps. After all, it was as if she had earned her own freedom. Cessilia understood her grandmother's words. It would have been foolish to trust a clan who had turned their back on this Kingdom for so many years so easily. They might be useful as spies and assassins, but it would take a long, long while before they proved their loyalty for real.

"Do you think I trust too easily?" Cessilia frowned.

"I think this world needs more women like you and your mother," chuckled Kareen. "Not every woman can wield a

sword, but every woman is a fighter."

Cessilia smiled.

"I think I heard something similar recently."

"Because it's true, and something the women in our family live by. Far too many times, women are underestimated. It is both a strength and a weakness. That goes for Ashen as well, Cessilia. That boy might be right for you, but remember, you're right for him too."

Cessilia smiled and nodded. Even without her grandmother saying it, she felt like she had already come a long way since she had landed in the Eastern Kingdom, and learned many things.

They walked a bit longer, lightly chatting about the shops Cessilia was starting to know about. One of Nana's cousins who recognized her even walked over to offer them some warm tea she was selling, and some dried fruits to snack on, all for free. She was the only one who approached them, but by now, many people were out in the streets, busy trying to get back to a normal life, either by clearing the debris, starting to repair their houses and shops, or, for the luckiest ones, resuming business as usual. The more they walked, the more the two women naturally drifted toward the seashore. They were just a couple of streets away from the docks and, to her surprise, her grandmother didn't seem bothered at all by the smell of fish.

"Grandmother..."

"Yes?"

"Do you believe that legend? About the pair of Earth and Sea Dragons? About that... mountain and that cave."

"Why do you ask that?" smiled Kareen, who already knew what Cessilia really wanted to know.

"Cece," muttered Cessilia. "You know I need to know. How did she come back? It has to do with that legend, right?"

...How did Mother know? I thought she simply suggested putting her in the lake of the Imperial Palace as a burial for a dragon, or so I wouldn't be too sad, but she knew, didn't she? She knew Cece would be back. Just... how?"

A mysterious smile appeared on Kareen's lips.

"I'm not sure your mother really knew," she said. "Perhaps she took a chance."

She didn't add anything, but Cessilia was getting restless. She ought to know more. She could tell there were some secrets her family hadn't disclosed yet, and she had rarely questioned them until now. Until it became about Cece too.

"Grandmother," she insisted. "...Please. I know Mother and Father both won't talk about it. This is related to what happened to my mother before I was born, isn't it? Kassian told me and Darsan. Krai was always by that lake... That place really is special, isn't it?"

After a while, Kareen sighed.

"...The lake itself isn't special. It's what's hidden beneath it that is."

"What's hidden beneath?"

"It's true," said Kareen, staring far ahead. "Your mother died, shortly after Kassian was born."

Cessilia was stunned. She had always had a hunch, but neither her or her brother had ever been able to confirm it. Their parents always firmly ignored that subject... Her mother would put on a sad smile and change the topic, while their father would look deeply hurt and angry. Both their reactions had made it so neither of them dared to ask twice.

"Just... how?"

"She died in the battle opposing one of your uncles, a wretched man who murdered your grandfather. Sadly, your mother gave her own life in that conflict. ...Shortly before, though, she had found out how special that lake truly was."

"Why the lake...?"

A faint smile appeared on Kareen's lips.

"The best secrets aren't uncovered in centuries-old libraries, but in a man's bed, Cessilia. Your grandfather had told me once that there was a secret buried deep in that lake. Something only the Emperor and their heir ought to know. He had told me, in case something happened to him, and with the intention that Kairen would become the next Emperor. Deep, deep, in the depths of that lake, a legendary creature was hidden."

"...A legendary creature?"

"Yes. A dragon so old, it was more a deity than a creature. No mortal could tame it, and the dragon always hid so deep inside the lake, no one could reach it. With the centuries going by, and the dragon never resurfacing, it had become no more than a legend passed on to the next generation."

"...But the Sea Dragon was there," muttered Cessilia. "Wasn't it? My mother's birth tribe was the Rain Tribe. They had ties to the Sea Dragon... and that's how she was saved. The Sea Dragon saved my mom's life."

"It did not save her," said Kareen. "Your mother was indeed dead, and her body was taken to the lake, just like your Cece. She stayed there for an awfully long time. Months, many months. If not for Kassian being just a newborn who needed his dad then, I don't know how your father would have endured it. He was heartbroken... It's no wonder neither of them can bear to talk about this, even today. That was the hardest time of their lives."

"So... Mother came back thanks to the Sea Dragon."

"Yes. She briefly talked with me about that matter, although it wasn't clear for her either. She did see that great dragon, that forgotten god from the depths."

Cessilia wasn't exactly shocked to hear all this, but it was still heavy on the heart. She knew the incredible love that united her parents. Many times, she had been the prime witness of it. Those gazes, kisses, and gentle gestures exchanged between her parents. Despite having so many children, her parents never forgot to have a tender moment with each other. She almost suspected they stayed apart for days just to be even happier to reunite. Or perhaps, did her mother know they should wait until the next child...?

At times, there was this strange worry in her father's eyes. If the smallest thing happened to their mother, something as

small as a flower's thorn pricking her finger, he'd get incredibly protective. Even with his children. Cessilia had many memories of her father being her favorite shadow, the strong arms she easily hid in, whenever she felt shy to the world. She knew her father was a strong man, a warrior who had fought every battle... yet she had never imagined his biggest scar was invisible.

"Do you think... the same dragon deity healed my Cece the same way?"

"It's possible," smiled Kareen, "if a dragon is still down there. Or perhaps, the centuries-long home of a Dragon God became a sanctuary itself. Who knows? But you know, your mother did say something. She said that water, in the depths of the lake, had a salty taste."

"Salty?"

Cessilia frowned. How could a lake's water possibly be salty? Moreover, she knew that lake well. Her siblings, their dragons, and she often played by that lake. They'd even swim and fool around in the shallow bank of it. She had never tasted that water to be anything close to salty...

"Could it be connected to the sea? That would tie it to the legend..."

"Maybe," smiled her grandmother, "but only your mother could swim deep enough to tell."

Cessilia was almost hoping she'd get to go home and swim in the depths of that lake now. She had never shown any interest because Tessandra and her younger siblings couldn't follow her that deep, but perhaps, if she tried to go really, really deep, she'd find that salty water...

"You're thinking a lot," chuckled Kareen.

"What about the Earth Dragon?" Cessilia immediately asked. "Krai... I mean, my father's dragon and their ancestors were all earth dragons, before what happened to Mother with the Sea God. Do we know where the other dragon rested, if it was still alive?"

Kareen smiled enigmatically.

"That legend... Do you remember the last dragons exchange?"

It took a few seconds for Cessilia to remember, with certainty, what those had been.

"I shall wait until the time when our children meet again, and our bloods become one, like when we were born. When that time comes, I will know your children made the world safe for them, and my offspring will finally come to the world. I will meet my human again, and give her the rest of my life, so I can join you in this blissful rest they call death. Then, you and I can rest peacefully, as I will have witnessed that our children will live on, safe and together."

"Exactly," nodded Kareen.

"It doesn't explain how that lake came to have salty water," muttered Cessilia, "nor how it was capable of healing

Cece, after it... resurrected my mother. Even if Cece had just a breath of life left in her, all of the Sea Dragon's life should have been passed on to Mother. So how did that lake...?"

"When our children meet again," said Kareen, "and our bloods become one.' Don't you have any idea how their blood would become one?"

Cessilia frowned.

"They died... in the same place?" she suddenly guessed. "They were apart all this time, but they reunited there?"

An enigmatic smile appeared on Kareen's lips, and she stopped walking, her eyes fixated on the ocean.

"Who knows how far and deep this ocean runs under the ground we walk on? Who knows how many centuries it takes for a mountain to become a hill? And who could possibly know the desire for two long-lost lovers to reunite, beyond time and space?"

Cessilia was stunned.

The dragons' story was so like her parents... she only realized then. They had gone through the death of the other, only to be reunited, a long, long time after. Perhaps it had taken centuries, but perhaps neither had ever really given up. Had the Sea Dragon dug its way, day after day, year after year, for centuries, back to that mountain where its love had died? To die in that lake, but not before witnessing how their children had finally come to be one again. The dragon had met Cassandra, one of the last descendants of its precious, long-lost, and beloved human, and finally been able to rest in peace... right in the place where the Earth Dragon had passed.

"...The vault," muttered Cessilia. "The Imperial Dragon Vault, the one Glahad guards. It's a cave, isn't it? I saw it once... a very old cave. But it's far above the ground level."

"You're a smart child, Cessilia. Yes, this place used to be the very heart of a mountain... a mountain Glahad's ancestors ferociously protected for centuries. Why do you think that stubborn old dragon never leaves it? It's his duty, and it is the duty of the strongest dragons in our family. Even Krai guards it at times now. And your brother's dragon will guard it too, someday.

And, according to your mother, that place is connected to—"

"To the lake," smiled Cessilia. "Isn't it? That explains a lot... that explains how Jinn was taken out without our family knowing!"

"Jinn?"

"The Red Dragon from the beach. Wouldn't we have noticed another dragon egg appearing?"

Kareen smiled enigmatically once again.

"There are still many things we don't know about our dragons, my Cessi. They are as sacred as they are our companions. That is why such secrets like their birth, the vault, and the eggs should remain a secret, always. Especially from people like the Cheshi. Do not forget. No one should know the dragons better than dragons themselves, Cessilia. Leave them a few of their secrets. That's the best way we will ever protect them and our family."

"I will," Cessilia promised.

Chapter 32

For a while, neither of them added anything, simply staring at the sea and its waves. Because they had walked closer and closer to the Fish Market, not only were the familiar smells getting to them, but the voices and sounds as well. Cessilia could hear Nana's uncles and aunts starting their work day as usual, perhaps working even harder to help the Kingdom after this complicated battle. The smell of delicious beignet dough soon came to their noses, and she heard her grandmother take a deep breath.

"Ah... this is what an old woman like me needs," she said. "New delicacies, fresh air, and some place to have new fun."

"So you really plan on staying?" Cessilia couldn't help but ask.

"Of course. I have a feeling my first great-grandbabies will be born in this Eastern Kingdom, do you think I would possibly miss that?!"

Cessilia blushed. Children... She hadn't even dared think about it recently. To think her grandmother already expected some... unless she meant that it would take a while for Kassian to find his partner? But there was Darsan too, and his relationship with Nana would probably keep progressing smoothly. Cessilia didn't know what to add after that, so she said nothing. But to her surprise, her grandmother chuckled.

"There you go again, my Cessilia. Too serious... You really are your parents' child. Don't worry. I still plan to live on for a few more years, you have plenty of time. Moreover, this place really does need some work..."

She stared down at a portion of the street they stood in, where the locals had gathered the pieces of debris that nothing could be done with. Some children were clearly given the task to sort it out as they were busy organizing it into piles of wood, metal, or stones with little brooms, an older boy in charge. The sight gave Cessilia an idea.

"You should become one of the counselors," she said.

"Me?" her grandmother exclaimed. "Why would I? This old lady is long retired from politics!"

"Ashen could use someone like you," Cessilia insisted. "Grandmother, you know politics and men better than anyone!

It's going to take a while before we get a new council going and finish digging out all of the traitors. You're unbiased as a noncitizen

of the Kingdom, and you're the wisest, most clear-sighted person I know."

"Flattery won't get you anywhere, Cessilia. Like I said, I just want a palace and fresh morning cocktails every day until

the end of my life. Actually, a view of the sea would be nice, as well."

"You're not just going to stay here doing nothing while Ashen and I struggle," Cessilia smiled. "I know you too well,

Grandmother. You just don't know how to sit back when our family is in trouble..."

"This old lady already outlived two Emperors, Cessilia. I do not want to have to take care of that brat of a king too!"

"Think about it. Please. It's not like you'll be busy until your palace is done... in many, many months."

Her grandmother rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, directing her stare toward the Fish Market rather than facing her

stubborn granddaughter. Cessilia didn't insist, but she was confident she'd get her grandmother to change her mind. Now that

this tiny seed was planted in her mind, Lady Kareen would most likely keep an eye on the politics of this Kingdom, and she

would definitely come out of her palace to help if they ever needed it. Perhaps she wouldn't become a counselor, but Cessilia

had learned to aim high if she wanted to hit anything at all...

"Who are you calling a brat of a king, Lady Kareen?"

Behind them, Ashen appeared, sighing. Cessilia had temporarily forgotten about his new haircut, so she got to discover

it a second time, with much pleasure when she turned around. She couldn't help herself and walked up to him, a big smile on

her face. Ashen smiled back, grabbing her hands. Beside them, Lady Kareen clicked her tongue loudly, a habit when she was

annoyed, one she had passed on to most of her children and grandchildren.

"Who else?" she shrugged. "You're too green to call yourself a man just yet."

"I'm up for a challenge," Ashen retorted. "Moreover, I heard the War God himself gets called a brat..."

Cessilia bit her lower lip to keep herself from laughing. Indeed, her grandmother wasn't gentle with the men she cared

about... She never had been. Ashen then turned his eyes to Cessi. He looked a bit calmer, more serene than before.

"Sorry," he said. "Our talk took a bit... longer than expected."

"Did you manage to tell him everything you wanted to say?"

"I hope so... I probably still won't become the Cheshi's favorite King, but that can't be helped. I don't think I'll ever

really trust them either. They never really forgave my mother, and neither did she. So, I think we might have to leave it at that

for a while. I've already learned to ignore them, anyway. And since they are quite obsessed with my future Queen..."

"Speaking of," said Kareen, "you—"

"Grandmother," Cessilia suddenly interrupted her. "...Not now, please."

Kareen raised an eyebrow. She wasn't mad at her granddaughter for cutting her off, but surprised. Cessilia had always been, by far, the most shy and obedient of her grandchildren, so this was highly unusual for her. After a few seconds, a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"...I think I'll go and check out that Fish Market," she finally said. "Those Dorosef people seem like they can come up with... surprising ideas."

Without giving them the time to say anything, she turned around and left, walking as elegantly as ever despite heading to the Fish Market.

Cessilia and Ashen watched the older woman until she was completely out of sight, then he turned to her, frowning and clearly a bit confused.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Grandmother was starting to be a bit too... inquisitive, about our love life."

"Hasn't she always been?"

"Let's just say I'm trying to manage her expectations for the future," muttered Cessilia, a bit embarrassed.

"Oh..."

If he had understood, Ashen didn't say anything. Instead, he gently took her hand, rubbing his thumb on her skin, and tilted his head.

"So you really do like my new haircut, huh? That look you gave me just seconds ago..."

"I just need a bit of time to get used to it!" Cessilia protested, embarrassed. "This is really different from before..."

"But you really, really like it," he chuckled, teasing her.

"Stop it..."

Cessilia walked away to avoid his amused eyes, but as their fingers were still interlaced and neither of them loosened

their grips, Ashen followed after her, a smile stuck on his lips. For a little while, they walked, in a different direction from the one Lady Kareen had taken, of course. They simply strolled along the river, holding hands, watching the Capital get back on its feet.

"I feel a bit guilty, not helping out," muttered Cessilia, after they walked by another group of children busy carrying little water buckets to their family.

"Don't worry, I'm sure we will be busy soon enough," sighed Ashen in response. "Plus, with everything we went through, you and I both earned a little break, don't you think?"

Cessilia nodded. It was in her nature that she couldn't help but want to do something, somehow, to relieve those people's burden. She tried to fight that feeling by reminding herself that neither she nor Ashen were completely healed. And he was right; they would both be the busiest getting this Kingdom back in order soon. For those people, it would perhaps be a matter of just days before they could resume life as it was, but for the two of them, nothing would be like it had been.

"...I'm curious," she whispered after a while, "about how it will turn out, in a few years. This Kingdom. You and I... which direction we will take it in."

"Do you have an idea in mind?" he smiled.

"A few... I don't want to do things like in the Empire. I've only been here for a short while, but... it's clear the heart of this Kingdom is so different. The people are different. That's how exciting it is. We could go in so many directions."

She smiled, trying to envision that future. Next to her, though, Ashen's smile gradually lessened, and he frowned, visibly absorbed in his thoughts. He suddenly stopped, surprising Cessilia as they were on a quiet street, without anything special around. Ashen looked down, seemingly conflicted.

"Cessilia... are you sure you'll be alright?" he suddenly asked.

"What do you mean?"

"If... If you stay here, if you marry me, and become the Queen... It will be hard for you to visit home. Maybe not now, but as time passes, it will get harder to go back. You won't be able to go there very often, even riding your dragon. Your brothers and sisters probably won't come often, either. I'm worried you might... get lonely, and one day, regret it."

Cessilia was surprised. So that was what he had been so conflicted about... Ashen, who had finally stopped pushing her away, was now even more afraid of her choosing him. This man... Cessilia couldn't help but fall for him a little more. She

liked how he said what was on his mind, but that mind was needlessly thinking and worrying too much at times. Still, she tried to think about it seriously. She knew his worries weren't completely baseless.

"...Would you rather I don't stay?"

She saw the utter pain on his face, for just a split second. Then, he took a deep breath, seriously pondering her question, and eventually, he nodded, very faintly.

"I think... as much as I want you by my side, I would regret binding you by my side, if you ever come to be unhappy about it. I have spent... years wanting you by my side, thinking I would do absolutely anything to get you in my arms, to make you my woman, but now... I realize that was my one-sided, selfish thinking. I barely got to experience having my family around,

but the pain of their loss was too hard. If you ever come to regret choosing me over your family, I would be the first one to regret it. I don't... I don't want you to have to choose, and I hate that you might come to regret either choice."

Cessilia sighed, and stepped forward. Suddenly, she slapped Ashen's cheeks between her hands, making him grimace, but forced him to look at her, her hands still cupping his face.

"Ashen. You are thinking way too much," she said. "Just stop. I understand what you are worried about, but I am a grown woman. I know exactly what I am doing staying by your side. Firstly, do not underestimate my Cece, she will fly me back to the Onyx Castle whenever I feel like it without issue. Secondly, even if I do get busy here and see my parents less often, so what? It won't make me bitter. I will look forward to being reunited with them even more! ...Do you know how my mother can keep working at the palace, away from my dad?"

"How?"

"Because she knows that no matter the distance, my dad's feelings for her won't ever change. Even if they miss each other, that's only because they love each other that much. They even enjoy sending each other letters during those times, and they are still very much in love after spending a month or two apart. They don't have any issues sending us away either, as long as we're safe and happy. My little sister often sneaks out and disappears for a week or two. My parents even hide away from us to have some alone time sometimes, they are a couple after all. ...I want the same thing, Ashen. I want to visit my family when I miss them, but I also want to be busy and happy with you. If I see them less, that means that I'm busy here. I don't want to stay at home being Daddy's princess! ...I want to be my man's Queen."

She smiled and tilted her head. This time, Ashen was the one who blushed, and had to look away, embarrassed. He grabbed her wrists to gently take her hands off his face.

"...I guess I'll have to keep you happy here, then," he said. "If I don't want... Daddy to pay me a visit."

"Oh, he won't need to," Cessilia chuckled. "You should be the one to come to the Empire, sometime."

Ashen grimaced. Perhaps it was a bit too soon for him, but Cessilia had no doubt the time would come when she would see Ashen and her father sitting together again, and chatting around the fire, a cup of wine in their hands.

"...One day," he finally muttered.

Cessilia smiled. Ashen had come a long way already, so it would take just a bit longer for him to finally heal from his past. And she felt like that truth was real for her too. While in the Eastern Kingdom, she had already overcome quite a lot.

Now, and with Ashen by her side, they would take their time building this Kingdom back up, and taking care of each other, paving the way for the future.

Ashen smiled again, and stepped forward, kissing her forehead.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Well, my cheeks hurt."

"Oh, sorry... I forgot I'm... a bit stronger than you."

Ashen chuckled, and took her hand again to slowly resume their walk.

"I'll survive that too. I need to toughen up if I want to be worthy of a dragon and her mistress."

Cessilia rolled her eyes. As if he had ever been unworthy. The truth was, she was probably the one with a lot to learn.

Becoming this Kingdom's Queen wouldn't be as easy as simply acting kind to the locals and eating fish beignets. She had good

relationships with the Clan Leaders, but she knew that the real hardships were to come.

Not all problems would have easy

solutions, and relying on the Empire's fortune wouldn't work twice either. Still, she felt strangely confident about the future

already....

"How about you?" she asked.

"What about me?"

"Do you have any visions for the future?"

"Oh... for this Kingdom... I don't know," he sighed. "To be honest, I used to live day to day, I never really thought

beyond the next week. I never got enough freedom to either. I was always busy keeping the tribes from fighting each other and

the Clan Leaders from jumping at each other's throats or mine. Now that so much has been destroyed, I can't really think of

what to do aside from repairs. I'm not a very visionary leader, it seems."

"Maybe start with one thing at a time... let's say, the castle. It's your castle, after all. It will need to be rebuilt too, at

least a large part of it... I mean, what we destroyed. What of it?"

"I hate it," Ashen scoffed. "I never saw that place as my home. More like I was simply there for the sake of being

called the King... I never really liked any of it. Except for the time spent with you there."

"I like the Cerulean Suite."

Ashen nodded.

"We can keep that..."

"We can do more than keep that," Cessilia chuckled. "Ashen... your Kingdom is so reliant on everything coming from

the sea. How about we rebuild the castle to that image? Let's make it a beautiful place, with so many seashells no one will be

able to count them all. Colored glass, sandstone, corals, and maybe even nacre. Let's get the artisans of your Kingdom to do

their very best and make that place a real palace, and a real home... After all, that's where you and I will live. With our own

family.”

To Cessilia’s surprise, that last sentence made Ashen unexpectedly smile. She could see his eyes lighting up at the idea,

as if she had just unlocked a precious little thought in his head.

“I thought you... Weren’t ready for children yet?” she boldly asked.

“I wasn’t. Not until recently... Maybe you convinced me, and your family inspired me.

Well, we can take it slow, so I

can learn... One at a time. Three or four children would be good... But that’s only if you want them too, of course!”

He had added that last bit urgently, with that worried expression back again, as if just realizing he might be putting

pressure on her. Cessilia smiled and nodded.

“I do want children too,” she said. “How wouldn’t I want them? But... maybe not right away. Let’s give ourselves a few

years so the castle can be rebuilt and ready for them, and our Kingdom back on its feet too.”

Ashen nodded, but to her surprise, she saw a hint of disappointment in his eyes. He really wanted children... It was a

good surprise to her. Cessilia thought that maybe she’d have them a little bit sooner than that, then.

“...Let’s go somewhere,” suddenly said Ashen.

He stopped walking, and wrapped his arms around her, visibly excited.

“Somewhere?”

“On a date,” he smiled. “Just you and me, while everyone is busy. After this, how many times will we be able to get

away and fool around, just the two of us? I want to take you away, now, while no one’s watching and have you all to myself.”

“But where? The castle is busy, and the cave will be submerged at this time...”

“I have another idea,” he chuckled. “Can you call Cece? We’re going to need a bit of a ride...”

Of course, Cece was only too happy to answer the call. The majestic Silver Dragon appeared flying high in the sky,

making Cessilia wonder what her friend had been up to so early in the morning. Had the dragon been extinguishing fires all

night, or simply watching over the Capital? Maybe the dragons had enjoyed a late morning hunt together, before Kian, Krai, and

Roun had been taken back home by Kassian. Cessilia realized, for her, home would be the Eastern Kingdom from then on... It

was a bitter-sweet feeling. She’d never stop loving the Empire she had grown up in, but she had a lot of love to grow for the

Eastern Kingdom as well. Especially if she got to shape it to her will, along with Ashen.

Cece began to dive, but fast, very fast. Seeing that the dragon wasn’t slowing down at all, and diving right in their

direction, Ashen and Cessilia exchanged a worried look. Cece definitely had seen them standing there, right? Yet the dragon

kept flying down, faster and faster, its silver tail whipping the air excitedly. Understanding at the last minute, Cessilia and Ashen suddenly grabbed each other and crouched down. Cece flew just an inch above them, and dove into the sea with a loud splash. A wave as big as the dragon washed over the sidewalk, rendering not only the two of them but all the people passing by completely drenched in sea water.

"Cece!" Cessilia exclaimed, shocked.

Next to her, Ashen was already laughing his head off, holding his ribs. He was also completely drenched, but absolutely fine with the dragon's playful joke. The dragon, who had disappeared under water, suddenly popped its head out of the water, with those big ruby eyes pointing at them, a hint of mischief in them.

"This isn't funny!" Cessilia protested.

In response, Cece spat another little jet of water from her mouth at her, but Cessilia jumped back just in time.

"Dran's been grounded for less than that, Cece, you know that" Cessilia told her dragon, squinting her eyes.

However, Cece blatantly didn't care, and kept happily swimming in circles in the water.

The silver body was making little hoops under and above water, in a snake's fashion, and was gathering a lot of attention too. All the people who had been doused before were now curiously staring at the gigantic dragon, having forgotten about their earlier protesting. Ashen stepped forward first, standing on the edge of the sidewalk, to face Cece with a big smile.

"Don't worry," he said. "There's nowhere big enough to keep you grounded anyway, girl."

Cece happily chirped, a strange sound that was a half growl, half high-pitched scream.

That was the first time Cessilia

heard her dragon make that sound, but no doubt it was all for Ashen. Having his attention was already making Cece happy, the

dragon completely smitten with him. Cece approached, and Ashen put his hands on the dragon's face with a smile. Despite

Ashen having rather big hands, Cece's face was still pretty large, making even him seem small. He scratched the dragon's silver scales, which made it swish its tail happily in the water.

"Can you let us ride?" Ashen asked with a smile.

Of course, Cece happily answered, and turned around for the two of them to climb on the floating part of the dragon's

body, just behind the head. Cessilia sighed. She felt like Cece would always get away with things as Ashen was ready to spoil

the dragon anytime... He sat first, and then extended his hand for her to take and climb behind him. By then, there was a whole

crowd assembled on the bay, watching the King and his lady ride a dragon away from the shore. Cece happily swam away

without Ashen even giving any directions yet.

Cessilia didn't dare to look back. For sure, Tessandra would learn of this somehow and scold her later about running away from all that needed to be done downtown... She couldn't help but feel unapologetic about it, though. In fact, it felt nice to just run away with Ashen and Cece, get away from all the chaos and commotion, and simply ride the waves, leaving behind all the troubles they would go back to later. For now, it seemed like they were free, swimming off from the world, into the unpredictable sea and its unruly waves.

They rode for a while. Cece seemed to enjoy the trip as much as they did, swimming effortlessly against the waves, and listening to Ashen's simple directions at times. The dragon would sometimes even dart its head to snatch a fish out of the water, and happily snack on it. The journey itself wasn't that long, and neither Cessilia nor Ashen said anything at all, both keeping silent and simply looking around. It was quite a unique feeling to be riding not in a boat but on a dragon above the water surface, their feet in the water at times, and being carried away from the land. Cessilia spotted bold fish swimming close by, unaware of the predator, and even bigger creatures that appeared on the horizon, smaller than Cece but still big enough to impress. She wondered if the Dorosef fishermen got this amazing show every morning at dawn. It probably wasn't as peaceful and relaxing, though. She kept hugging Ashen from behind, not because she needed to hold on to him, but simply for the pleasure of sharing that moment with him. She silently hoped that they would take small trips together like this even when they got busier and older...

For a while, she wondered where they were going, especially since Ashen seemed to be giving rather precise directions. Then, she finally saw a piece of land, far ahead, popping up on the horizon. Cessilia was surprised. This island was so far away, they couldn't see it from the shore... The closer Cece got, the more she also realized that part of the reason was because the island itself was quite small. It was about the same size as the Central Plaza, so Cessilia could still see both ends as Cece reached the shore. The dragon climbed on the beach, visibly curious to explore as well. Ashen and Cessilia barely had time to get off before Cece ran away, dashing between the trees. From the way her dragon was excited, Cessilia guessed it had spotted some prey to hunt... Soon enough, they only saw a silver tail, then nothing. She chuckled. At least Cece would stay entertained while the two of them enjoyed their little date. "Another surprise?" she asked Ashen, a smile on her lips. "It's a place I've always been curious about," he confessed. "This island is a bit of a local legend... They say fishermen

bring their lovers here.”

“Oh, really?”

Cessilia looked around the island, surprised. She could see why. This place was so beautiful and quiet. It felt different from the mainland. The beach was full of white sand, and thousands of those gorgeous seashells she loved. There weren't enough trees to call it a forest, just a few scarce ones, but a lot of green bushes and wild plants growing everywhere. It had many varieties she had absolutely never seen before, and if she wasn't on a date with her lover, Cessilia would have definitely wanted to explore more... However, Ashen gently grabbed her hand, and they began strolling along the beach together, a strange and shy feeling growing between them. Cessilia was curious as to why he had brought her here, but she didn't want to rush him.

“Are you sure we'll be alone?” she asked.

“The fishermen are all busy at this hour,” he said. “Plus, we would have seen a boat...” Cessilia had almost forgotten they just had quite a special ride. Indeed, with the size of the island, they would have seen right away that they weren't alone. She was a bit more surprised about the nervousness in Ashen's voice though. What was he thinking about? She didn't ask, and simply kept walking along with him. At times, they heard the excited dragon from the other end of the island, when Cece wasn't suddenly jumping out of nowhere to run back into the sea chasing water prey. Cessilia was happy to see her dragon having so much fun. For sure, her Cece deserved to have all the fun possible, and catch up on everything those years in the lake had taken away...

“So it's your first time here too?” she asked Ashen after a little while.

“Yes,” he nodded. “I just heard about this place so many times... especially when I was a child. I used to listen to the fishermen's stories, but this was the one place they always talked about to woo the ladies. They said if a fisherman took a woman to this island, it was with the intent for her to become his wife.”

Cessilia's heart skipped a beat. Was that why he had brought her here...? To reaffirm his feelings? They had spoken so many times about her becoming his Queen now, but hearing him say the word wife had a surprisingly different ring to it. She

felt her cheeks get a bit warmer, and Ashen's fingers tightened around hers. He suddenly stopped walking, and she heard him take a deep breath before he turned to face her, looking serious like never before.

“Cessilia... I know we agreed for you to become my Queen and everything, but... I also wanted to let you know, I won't

just treat you like my Queen. I want you to be my wife, my one and only wife. There won't be any more talk about concubines, favorites, and mistresses. Never again, not in my Kingdom. I will abolish the rule about the King being allowed as many

women as he wants. I don't want you to be my favorite, I want you to be my one and only woman consort."

This time, Cessilia was properly stunned. So this was what he had been thinking about all this time? She had come here

as a candidate bride, but all that fighting between women had been a race to become the King's Queen, while most weren't

interested in anything but the position itself... In the midst of this, Cessilia had come, with her unwavering feelings for Ashen,

and claimed the King's heart for herself anyway. He was right; she had never aimed to be the first, but the only one in his heart.

She wouldn't have tolerated any other woman in his bed, and she couldn't be like Jisel, ready to close her eyes as long as she

kept the position. Cessilia cared little about becoming Queen. What she truly wanted was to be this King's wife... and she

would have wanted Ashen, nobody but Ashen, even if he had been a fisherman, a soldier, or any common man. He was no

prince when she had fallen for him, and she had never seen him any other way.

Right then and there, she could tell they were really just a man and woman, a couple like any other, on a pretty island,

just the two of them. Ashen suddenly took a deep breath, and put a knee down in front of her.

"Ashen, what are you...?" she gasped.

"There's an oath knights make to a lady or a master," he said. "I want to make an oath to you, Cessilia... I promise,

from this moment on, I will never look at another woman the way I look at you. I swear I will never make another woman more

important than you are to me. I swear I will never take another woman into my bed, or to be mine. I only want you. I've always

wanted you, just you. I'll be the most satisfied of men if you'll make me your man too. I would do anything, absolutely anything,

to make you happy as my wife. I will never let you feel jealous again, if you'll let me take your hand. If you'll marry me."

Cessilia had tears in her eyes, and that terrible urge to cry. She had always been his, but Ashen's oath was beyond all

she could have hoped for. She loved him so much at this moment, it almost hurt her poor heart. She couldn't handle the turmoil

of emotions. She was happy; undoubtedly, endlessly happy.

Before she could think of an answer, Ashen took out a little box. She had no idea he was carrying this on him, or even

how he'd hidden it all this time. The box was about the size of her hand, very simple and wooden, but when he opened it,

Cessilia's jaw dropped. A marvelous piece of jewelry was beautifully displayed inside. It wasn't a ring or a bracelet, but

something combining both. She immediately recognized the peculiar and beautiful shine of nacre pearls, assembled in waves

and lines, shining with the most beautiful colored shades under the sunlight.

“Ashen... that’s...”

Without saying a word, looking quite emotional himself, he helped her put it on. He first put the golden bracelet on her wrist, and pulled the complex tangle of nacre pearls to cover the back of her hand, before putting the other end of the jewelry, a golden ring, on her finger. It was a beautiful, delicate piece. Cessilia realized, through the unique shape, the nacre beads were actually sculpted and expertly interlaced to replicate the appearance of dragon scales. They undulated with every movement, and were tightly bound in little waves. The nacre pearls shone iridescent, reminiscent of the beautiful columns in the Cerulean Suite. The jewelry had been beautifully crafted, looking simple, feminine, and delicate on her hand, without being too much. The contrast of the iridescent white pearls against her bronze skin was making it all even more perfect. The gold ring and bracelet seemed to be only beautiful accessories to this uniquely crafted piece. Cessilia was genuinely speechless. This jewelry seemed to be perfect, and... made for her. At a loss for words, she glanced at Ashen, who smiled. “You like it?”

“I absolutely love it,” she muttered. “Ashen, it’s beautiful...”

“I heard you loved nacre the most,” he smiled, relieved, “so I asked them to focus on it more than the gold.”

“But when... Just how did you...?”

She couldn’t understand. Gold was incredibly rare and valuable in the Eastern Kingdom. One piece alone would be worth so much, and he had found enough to make both a ring and a bracelet. Not only that, but the nacre piece was clearly designed for her...

“The gold is actually... something I took with me, when I left the Empire,” he confessed.

“It bothered me for a while. It

was a simple gold bracelet your mother had given me. I think back then, she already knew it was worth a lot for an orphan of

the Eastern Kingdom. I took it, but I could never sell it. A part of me felt like I didn’t deserve to use it. At the same time, I kept

it as a memento, and just in case I would need it someday. When it became clear that you’d stay, I figured it would be a good

way to give it back. So, when I heard your friend mention you loved nacre from the Cerulean Suite, I secretly asked the daughter of the Sehsan Tribe to help me with it.”

“Lady Bastat?”

He nodded.

“I asked her when we were busy with the flood, not knowing how long it would take, but to my surprise, it was finished

quickly last night... I went to get it this morning, right before I joined you and Lady Kareen.”

Cessilia could barely believe her own ears. This had been in the making for so long already? She glanced at the piece of jewelry again, trying to repress her urge to cry. She absolutely loved it. It was unique, and looked both beautiful and strong, like her.

"Get up," she muttered.

He obeyed, a bit surprised, and Cessilia immediately jumped into his arms, hugging him tightly. Ashen chuckled, and hugged her back.

"I'm happy you like it."

"Of course I like it... You had it made just for me. Thank you..."

She raised her head to kiss him, and they exchanged a long, deep kiss. Cessilia felt the salty taste of her tears in their

kiss, once she couldn't hold them back anymore. She had never realized it was possible to cry this much out of happiness. She

felt like her emotions were physically overflowing, pouring everything into that kiss with Ashen. She had never felt so

complete, so confident and happy. Whatever came their way, she knew she'd be able to face it with Ashen by her side. It didn't

matter how many injuries and scars the two of them carried, as long as they'd stick together. That was all she really needed.

After a little while, their lips parted, leaving Cessilia almost dizzy, her cheeks red and hot.

"So... that's why you brought me here?" she asked, trying a bit shyly to change the topic.

"Not exactly."

She frowned at his answer. Then, to her surprise, Ashen gently pulled her toward the calm waves. Cessilia followed

his lead, until they were both in the water up to their knees.

"What are we doing?" she chuckled.

"Don't you love swimming the most?" He smiled. "I thought you'd like it here..."

"But the water's cold."

"Not for you."

To her surprise, he suddenly took off his cloak, tossing it onto the beach, and walked deeper into the water. Perhaps

because it was a bit cold, his abs seemed tighter than usual, and more than satisfying to the eye. Soon enough, he turned around,

water up to his bare waist, and gave her a devilish smile, running his hand through his now short white hair. The sight of the

seawater running down his body, the sun behind him, was one vision Cessilia never, ever wanted to forget.

Cessilia stepped further into the water, a smile on her lips, dying to join him. The waves gently grazed her thighs, and

higher up her legs as she slowly walked up to her man. Ashen was standing there, handsome as ever and calmly waiting for her.

In fact, he seemed more serene and handsome as always, his dark eyes riveted on her with a faint smile on his lips. He was stunning with the sunlight coming from behind him, sending gorgeous shimmers throughout his shiny white hair. Cessilia was happy to join him in this peaceful setting. The water reached up to her waist when she finally took his hand. He pulled her against him, with a playful expression, his naked, wet torso against her. Cessilia smiled, putting a hand around his nape. He was even more handsome up close... Without the two of them exchanging a word, she slowly brought her fingers, a bit of seawater dripping from them, to caress the lines of his torso. His skin and muscles reacted to her cool touch, but he didn't try to move away from it. Cessilia smiled. That skin was marbled with countless scars, but there was a complex beauty in those imperfections. She loved the touch of the irregular skin under her fingers... She was almost sure that even blind, she would have recognized that pattern by heart. Ashen gently grabbed her hand, pulling her fingers away from his skin. Cessilia chuckled. Was he getting a bit ticklish? His ears were slightly red... "This reminds me of when we were younger," he whispered. "We would always sneak out, away from your siblings and parents, to just be the two of us." "It was hard to be alone," she nodded. "...We barely ever got any time to ourselves during the day." "But when night fell..." He stepped even closer, bringing Cessilia's eyes up to his face, where a nostalgic smile appeared. "It was easier to spend time together." "Under the moonlight," she whispered. "We'd sneak out to the roof and watch the stars. Or to the forest, and listen to the noises the animals made in the evening..." Ashen nodded slowly. "...It still feels almost unreal to be out in the daylight with you like this." He gently brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it, closing his eyes as if enjoying this given grace deeply. Cessilia blushed, feeling his lips pressed against her skin, his large hands gently holding hers. Ashen had always treated her so gently, carefully, as if she was the most precious and fragile thing in the world, despite knowing all too well she was much stronger than he was. It was his way of truly showing his affection for her. Cessilia smiled as he raised her hand, making the jewelry shine when the sunlight hit it. "...I really love it," she whispered. "I'm glad. I can't promise I'll give you presents often, but I will do what I can so you don't miss out on anything." "Of course," she chuckled.

In truth, there was nothing much that Cessilia was wanting more than this. She loved the spontaneity of this gift, she didn't want Ashen to feel pressure to constantly give her more. She got on her toes and kissed his lips quickly.

"We have a castle to rebuild first," she said, "and a Kingdom to get back in working order. A bridge to rebuild, and... a new city to plan too."

He sighed.

"Sounds like we won't have much time for our escapades."

"We can always make time," she chuckled. "We have Cece, and no matter how busy the day will be, the moonlight will still come, every night, to pull the lovers back together..."

"I'd sure love that."

Ashen pulled her in to kiss again. Their kiss tasted like morning sunshine, seawater, and dried fruits. She caressed his nape and the bushy tip of his hair, unable to get enough of his new haircut. It was so satisfyingly short under her fingers, she couldn't stop brushing her fingertips against it. While she had her arms around Ashen's nape, he suddenly put his arms under her butt and lifted her up, carrying Cessilia effortlessly. She wrapped her legs around his torso.

"How am I supposed to swim like this?" she laughed.

"I'll do the swimming."

He lowered his body into the water, and gently carried her around. Although she had always loved diving and swimming, Cessilia was quite enjoying this too. It was as if they were floating and hugging, their bodies carried by the sea and rocked by its waves. It was so incredibly calm around them... They could only hear the birds, the sounds of nature, and sometimes, the growls of an excited dragon playing nearby. Cessilia was feeling quite excited too. The more time she and Ashen spent in the water, the more she wanted to tease him, and not just be carried away. She began to pour some water down his neck, making him grimace a bit, and soaked more of his hair as he kept swimming, unwilling to let go of her.

"Are you trying to give me an extra shower?" he sighed.

"You promised me swimming!"

"Here we go then."

Without warning, he suddenly dropped her. Cessilia let out a faint scream, but easily found her way back to the surface.

She realized they were in deeper water than just before, and had been surprised to find nothing under her feet when she expected to touch the bottom. Looking around for Ashen, she heard his laughter, loud and without restraint. Cessilia bit her lip, and splashed some water his way as retribution.

"Are you mad, my Queen?" he laughed, wiping the seawater off his face.

"You're so childish at times!" she exclaimed. "You should be worried I could drown you back!"

"I'm at your mercy," he sighed. "Although, I do think Cece would rescue me. You love me too much..."

Cessilia opened her mouth wide, in shock of how bold he suddenly was, and in a timely manner, Cece appeared right

behind him too. The Silver Dragon swam right behind the King, its body pressing against Ashen's back as if to offer some

support, before exchanging a glance with Cessilia. Then, she saw her dragon dive back to disappear underwater again. For

sure, Cece had already chosen which side to be on...

Soon enough, she and Ashen began playing in the water, teasing and flirting with each other like they were unruly teens

all over again. Slowly but surely though, they were getting closer to one another. They went from splashing each other with

water to more handsy games, trying to steal a kiss from one another without drowning in the process. The excitement was

subtly evolving into something more sensual. Their skin got warmer, the space between them getting less and less, and their

hands couldn't stay off one another anymore. Their kisses got a bit more savage, needy, deep. Cessilia felt the heat rising

inside, and Ashen's hands on her were getting more invasive too. He grabbed her hips again, moving up under her skirt,

caressing her skin and teasing her. She was almost riding his leg, and the proximity of their lower halves was getting hotter too.

Above the water surface, their lips could barely part anymore. She felt his fingers in her hair, going down her back, caressing

her nape and holding her close. Soon enough, he pulled down the top of her dress, revealing her breasts, the extremities perking

up from the heat or cold, she couldn't tell. Ashen's lips went down to kiss, gently bite, and fondle them. His mouth on her skin

was making her even more hot and excited. He kept teasing her, above and below, and Cessilia's breathing was getting erratic.

His tongue on her skin was so hot, and sexy... She gasped when his hand caressed her between the legs. Her thighs were

already feeling so tense and hot, but this was taking it up another notch.

While she still rode him, Ashen suddenly pulled her up once again, carrying her back to the beach, out of the water. She

realized the sun was getting high and hot as its rays hit her skin. Ashen walked back almost to the line of trees, and put her

down for just a second. They threw their clothes under them, and Cessilia pushed him down, his butt hitting the fabric first.

Before he could say anything, she sat across his lap, resuming their kissing. He didn't seem to mind at all. Their kissing became

more passionate now that they were both completely naked, hot and dangerously close to one another. She was already right

above his manhood, but Ashen's hands went back between her legs first and resumed the teasing, sending shivers of excitement throughout her body. Cessilia could feel the excitement rising, her desire building in her lower stomach. She tried to keep up with the kissing, a hand on Ashen's shoulder to hold herself, but she wanted it. She wanted to feel him inside her so badly...

"Cessi..."

She went down, slowly, letting his hard member open her up again. Ashen let out a hoarse groan of satisfaction, and his hand squeezed her thigh a bit tighter. This was probably unbearably slow for him, but she loved the slow grinding inside, as their bodies readjusted to one another. This time, it felt a bit easier, more natural. Cessilia pushed until Ashen was so deep she could push no further, his member filling her to the brim.

"So good," he whispered against her ear, caressing her neck.

She nodded faintly. She was riding Ashen, and they were both naked in the open, but she had never felt more confident, safe, and loved. Each of his movements was a caress meant to confirm his love for her. He adjusted their position a bit, making it easier for them to pleasure each other. The slightest move made Cessilia moan. He kissed her cheek, again and again, as if to soothe her, letting her decide when they'd move. There was no hurry now that their bodies were united, and already eager for more. They kissed deeply, and at some point, Cessilia began to gently undulate her body, at a slow but pleasant rhythm that woke more sensations in her. She had a hunch this would become her favorite position. Especially because Ashen had all the freedom to move too... and he didn't wait long. After just a few more seconds, his hips began answering her movements, taking her a bit deeper, making her cry out more, wanting more.

"Ha... Ha... A-... Ashen..."

He kept kissing her cheek, or breathing against her temple, their faces so close they could feel each other's excited breathing. His hands on her butt got a bit more impatient, and Cessilia felt him push farther and farther in, making her tremble and cry as he accelerated. She liked to be dominating, but Ashen's restlessness was just as pleasant. He was like a hungry beast unleashed, slowly losing control of his desire, getting a bit more brutal and demanding. Cessilia was growing to like this.

Trying to ignore how unfamiliar and embarrassing her own voice was, she leaned back, allowing him to get deeper, focusing on the sensations of him ramming into her, the depth he reached, not quite able to catch her breath.

"Cessi... Cessilia..."

Her name with his hoarse voice was an enthralling combo. She wasn't very experienced in sex yet, but she did want to

learn its secrets, to become better at it, to entice her King more and more. She could feel what so many women felt in becoming a man's mistress... This desire to submit them to this pleasure, and bind them with their bodies. She wanted to become the one to bring him that pleasure, to make him intoxicated with the chemistry only the two of them shared. Cessilia was eager to master all the secrets of sex, the very good sex that made one forget everything else... Ignoring how her voice seemed to get louder, raspier, and sexier, she began to accelerate her hips with the sounds of their skin slapping against each other. She could feel the exquisite sensations from their wild love-making, Ashen's rod feeling bigger, his large hands grabbing her skin and pulling her even more forcefully against him. His bestial groans were exciting her the most. She pushed him down, completely toppling him, her hands fiercely grabbing his shoulders to hold herself up; he wasn't defeated just yet though. His hip thrusts were getting even wilder under her, making Cessilia cry out louder each time their bodies brutally collided again. She felt it. The faint tickle to let her know her release was coming, that wave building up in her lower stomach that was just waiting for the right moment to let go.

"A-Ashen... Ha... Ashen!"

As if he'd understood, he accelerated too, his groans getting louder, his hips accelerating again for the last sprint.

Cessilia lost control before him. She felt her whole body tremble, while Ashen was still thrusting in, sending dangerous waves of pleasure, one after another, throughout all her limbs. Her voice was cut off from the mind-blowing sensation, and for a second, all that remained was Ashen's final groans, before he got his release too. It felt like an eternity before Cessilia managed to calm down, her body still tense, hot, and strange. Her breathing was completely out of control, but she suddenly chuckled, unable to control herself. Under her, Ashen suddenly tensed up.

"Oh," he groaned. "That was one dangerous sensation..."

He sighed, and gently pulled out. Cessilia softly fell on top of him, out of strength, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder.

"I can fight a dragon," she muttered. "So why is this so hard and draining...?"

"I'm glad I'm not the dragon," Ashen chuckled, kissing the top of her head. "...Also, we can always practice our stamina with time."

"Are you not satisfied?" Cessilia frowned, worried, and propped herself up on her hands to stare at him.

"My Queen, I am so satisfied, I worry we might have our firstborn on the way much sooner than planned. I'm probably the one who needs to practice my patience if our love-making sessions are so great."

He chuckled, and after a quick kiss, pulled her back to lay on his chest again, gently caressing her back. Cessilia smiled, a bit relieved. Indeed, this was getting much better each time... She closed her eyes, laying down on his chest, letting the sunlight and Ashen's fingers gently caress her back. It was strange how long her body needed to get out of this numbness after sex, while some sensations lingered in all of her limbs.

"...Are you asleep?" he chuckled.

Cessilia opened her eyes. She hadn't fallen asleep, but she had been quite close. She pouted, and lifted her head to put her chin on his torso, and stared at Ashen. She caressed his lips with her fingertips, which he kissed playfully, making her smile.

"Not yet," she sighed, "but I love this place for sure... We should do this often from now on."

"We will," he promised. "I don't think I can get enough of the sight of your skin under the sun."

Cessilia blushed a bit. She also liked to see the contrast of their skins against one another. Her and her siblings had come in quite a few different skin shades, and she sure hoped it would be the same for her and Ashen's children. She loved the idea of filling their world with more colors... She blushed a bit, thinking about how she could imagine herself with children already. She wasn't sure she was fully ready right now, but she would definitely want a few children.

"...You haven't answered me," he suddenly muttered.

"What?"

"My proposal," he said, almost pouting. "I haven't heard your answer."

"...Do you really need to hear it?" she smiled.

"Yes," he said. "I want to engrave this moment in my mind and remind you of the decision you once made, after some passionate love-making with your future husband."

Cessilia chuckled, and leaned over to kiss his lips, amused.

"Alright... It's a yes, my King. I will marry you."

The smile on Ashen's lips immediately brightened. Cessilia smiled back, and caressed his torso some more with her fingertips.

"...You do know you should probably meet my parents again before that happens, right?" she pointed out.

Ashen's smile melted.

"Come on," Cessilia said. "It will be alright... I won't ask for a big ceremony, I just want my family to be there."

"As if they'd let you have anything less than a big ceremony," he chuckled. "I can already hear your grandmother and aunts protesting. Oh no, my Queen, we will have a nice ceremony, I promise. Maybe not right away, but... in due time, we will

have a beautiful wedding.”
“Alright, then,” she smiled.