

The White King's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 4

#4 The War God

Despite the young woman's harsh words, Yassim couldn't even answer anything to that. In a way, he knew his home nation had traded the worst possible outcome for another, not much brighter one. Better than anyone else perhaps, he knew how complicated and deep the situation was for the King of the East. The white-haired young man had returned, grown and much more mature than the child everyone had remembered, with a gigantic, dark hole in his heart, and that rage that wouldn't leave his eyes. The truth was, perhaps that new King would end up being worse than his father. In a desperate desire for another leader, a different outcome, perhaps they had sealed their fate...

Yet, when Yassim looked ahead at the young green-eyed woman, a light of hope appeared in his old heart. He had come here on a crazy bet, a silly idea. As old as he was, Yassim wasn't scared to die, if not in vain or painfully. However, this old man would be able to lie peacefully if he couldn't try, one last time, to do something for his country. It was too soon to tell the truth to the Princess, and he knew he'd pay that price later. But, if by an incredible chance, his assumption turned out to be right, this old servant would be truly grateful he hadn't made this journey in vain...

"What's your relationship to the King?" Asked Tessa. "He only sent one man to the Dragon Empire to fetch him a wife, isn't that too little?"

Yassim bowed as he could while trying not to fall off.

"His Highness charged this mission on this servant alone, my Lady. While the previous King was still alive, I was tasked with the education of the young Prince, and I taught him all I could, to the best of my abilities. I watched over this young man for many years, and I believe to be one of his closest aides. Our King is young, and due to the chaotic past of our Nation, he still has many, many enemies. I am sad to admit, the people our King can truly trust are too few."

"A real nest of snakes, then... So, he sent you here almost on a secret mission, then?"

"No one else knows I was sent here," admitted Yassim.

It was important to him not to lie to their highnesses, at least to avoid it as much as he could. He was already incredibly lucky that the Princess had agreed to this insane request, and he was mentally prepared that the truth would be unveiled at any moment. He only hoped he'd get a chance to offer his apology...

"Sounds like a lot of fun," chuckled Tessa, playing around with one of her braids. "Oh well, it will be entertaining at least..."

It was impressive how those young ladies didn't seem to fear anything, not even going to a different land to face a King who had allegedly killed his own father.

Yassim felt their countries, despite many similarities, were still two different worlds. He couldn't help but feel saddened as the gigantic black dragon flew effortlessly above the lands and villages, the citizens of the Dragon Empire appearing like tiny dots far below. Those forests were green, their lands full of growing crops, the houses full of happy families living their every day life under a stable Empire. The Eastern Kingdom knew little about their neighbor because they had too much to figure on their own. How much would both countries have thrived together if there had been any room to learn from the other! As a wise man and scholar, Yassim could only feel saddened by all that knowledge that wasn't shared, how so much hatred and doubt had been fueled instead of trust... She had no idea yet, but this young princess might be the one to bring an incredible change into both nations' future.

As the girls had mentioned, riding a dragon was bound to bring them to their destination faster than any horse. After a while, the landscapes below and ahead slightly changed, mountains perking up right in front of them. The villages and human habitations were getting rarer as well, and the temperature was getting colder around them. They had been flying for a while, and Yassim was glad he had brought a cape, but he was not ready for the north of the Empire. Unlike their Kingdom, the Dragon Empire was more lengthy than wide, hence, it's northern regions were much colder than the Capital, and most of their lands.

From afar, he spotted the dark building. It wasn't just a black castle; the fortress was shining incredibly as the sun was getting lower in the sky. Was it getting late already? Yassim hadn't realized. He had arrived in the Capital in the morning, waited a long time to see the Empress and now, had spent an even longer while on a dragon's back. Neither the Dragon carrying them or the young ladies seemed in need of a break. While Krai was only flapping his wings lazily from time to time, the girls ate meat-filled buns from their satchels, giving Yassim one, and enjoyed the ride quietly, obviously used to this. The wind was getting stronger, colder and louder, hence why they couldn't speak much for now.

When the dark dragon started descending, the old man felt most grateful to finally catch a break. Although the ride was rather stable, it was very uncomfortable to sit on a scaled and not flat seat...

What he hadn't expected, though, was the actual size of that castle. He had been impressed by the incredible size of the Imperial Palace in the Capital, but he hadn't expected there would be any other big structures in the Empire. Yet, this Castle was getting bigger and bigger, and they weren't close yet! He had been mistaken by the lack of other buildings or villages around to compare the size, but he really understood how he'd been fooled when he realized that what he had taken for a small statue was actually another full-sized dragon!

The best was growling loudly as they approached, and Yassim was once again impressed by the mighty creature. This one wasn't as big as the War God's Dragon, but it was certainly the closest he had seen so far. Unlike the not-so-small ones from earlier, this yellowish-brown one was at an adult size, just a bit smaller than Krai, large and long like five horses. Moreover, it had a long body that wouldn't stop moving around, and he was growling loudly as they landed.

"Hi, Dran!" Exclaimed Tessa, jumping down as soon as Krai landed.

"It's my second b-brother's d-dragon..." Explained Cessilia, as she gently helped Yassim come down.

"Oh... So this is what Lady Tessa meant about the dragon's size earlier..."

Yassim was once again genuinely impressed, but also terrified. This dragon was an adult size, and visibly very unruly, growling and pulling on the chain around its neck to try and get closer to the girls. His claws had ravaged and laboured all the soil around him. Yassim was surprised to see one of the dragons chained. So they didn't leave those creatures completely free, after all?

Behind them, Krai loudly growled after Dran the yellow dragon, and both began exchanging deafening growls.

"Oh, he's probably punished..." grimaced Tessa. "Don't get close to Dran, Old Man, he's a bit more dangerous, and he's stupid enough that he'd bite you without thinking. Dragon teenagehood."

Yassim nodded helplessly, but even without Tessa's warning, he would have never been brave enough to approach the reckless dragon of his own volition. This one was visibly younger than Krai, and much more agitated, growling and showing his fangs, his tail whipping the air and knocking against the wall behind him. If he hadn't been chained, what havoc such a creature could have caused! Yassim didn't even dare imagine. And this was only one of the many dragons they had!

Because he had been too captivated by the appearance of another one of those creatures, Yassim almost missed the man coming out of the Castle's gates. Not that he could be missed, though: he had never seen such an imposing man.

This couldn't be anyone else but the War God himself. He was moving like a deity among mortals, his impressive body exuding an immeasurable strength and aura. His dark eyes were pinning the old man right where he stood, as if they mirrored storm and chaos, ready to unleash hell. The man was wearing a thick, black cape on his shoulders, confounding with his long black hair. He had strong features, a straight jawline and a presence that imposed respect right away. Not even the most brazen soldier would have dared step out of line. Yet, the young princess smiled, and ran fearlessly to this man's arms.

“Dad!”

The War God opened his arms right before his daughter reached him, and hugged her back, a slight smile appearing on his face as the girl disappeared in his embrace.

“Cessi.”

One word, but a voice as deep as a volcano. Yassim felt a strange emotion surge in him as he was given to meet this living legend, and the old man bent right away, very emotional. After the Empress, the War God himself was standing before him! The old man was shaking a bit, but being intimidated was expected. What he had not foreseen, however, was how incredibly gentle and fatherly the War God was towards his daughter. He hugged Cessilia for several seconds, and reluctantly stepped away from her to stare at her, as if he hadn't seen his daughter in a while. He even caressed her hair and kept a hand in her back.

“Hi, uncle!” Said Tessa, waving at him.

“...Tessa,” he nodded, greeting his niece before looking at his daughter again. “What are you guys doing here?”

Cessilia briefly glanced back at Yassim, and suddenly, the old man felt the pressure of the War God's stare on him, and bowed again, worried sick. This man obviously loved his daughter. Would he be willing to let her go...?

“T-this is Yassim the Wise, F-father. He c-came from the Eastern K-Kingdom...”

The War God's didn't answer to that, adding to the poor Yassim's anxiety. He had come to take this man's daughter to another country, he wouldn't even dare cry if he was about to get his head cut off!

“...Come inside.”

While neither of the girls seemed scared at all by the living god, the poor Yassim's legs were ready to give in at any minute, and if it wasn't for Dran's sudden growl behind him, perhaps he wouldn't have dared to get back up and follow inside!

“Father why is D-Dran chai-... Chained...?” Asked Cessi, holding her father's arm as they walked inside.

“He's punished.”

“That idiot destroyed a mountain!” Suddenly answered a feminine voice from the inside.

“Auntie Nebbie!”

A beautiful woman appeared inside, with long dark hair and pouty lips. She was wearing a long green dress and a coat, and from the way she carried a pile of cleaning cloths, she was probably a servant here, but to Yassim's surprised, both girls greeted her like a family member.

"What did that idiot do?" Laughed Tessa.

"That pair of idiots decided it would be fun to play between the mountains, until they broke several rocks and provoked a landslide," sighed the dark-haired woman. "Darsan is not to come back until he puts it all back up, and Dran is not allowed to help him..."

She sent a glare towards the yellow beast, who answered with a growl. Yassim was lost. It couldn't be that the War God had sent his son to put the mountain back with... his bare hands only? What kind of young man could do such a thing! It would take months even if it was possible! Those people had to be living in a different world, or holding some secret meaning he hadn't grasped...

"What are you girls doing here?" Frowned the servant woman. "...Did Kiera run away again? She's not here."

"We know," chuckled Tessa. "She probably ran to grandmother's or somewhere in the Capital with her friend."

"...I need... t-to t-talk t-to father," muttered Cessilia.

Yassim took note the young woman did seem nervous, and it reflected in her way of speech... The big, hopeful eyes she had on her father didn't match his kind expression while looking at her, which made the old man more nervous. Princess Cessillia expected her father to be reluctant to do this.

Noticing the expression between these two, and her eyes gliding over the old man, Aunt Nebbie frowned, but Tessa walked ahead, grabbing some of the towels.

"Aunt Nebora, should we make some tea first? And I have a few things to ask you to help us with..."

Grasping the cue, Nebora nodded, and the two women quietly left, both sending worried or curious glances towards the strange trio left behind.

The poor Yassim was due for another dose of anxiety. Him, alone with the Princess to explain to her father he was about to take her to his King, a ruthless young man who had beheaded his own father and taken over the Kingdom by force? Even the bravest man in the Empire would have begged the Gods for mercy already! However, before the old man could lose the few white hair he had left, Cessilia and her father walked to a room, a little salon on the side. There was the biggest chimney he had ever seen, with a large fire easily warming up the whole room, and several huge cushions on a large

carpet underneath. There was only one large wooden seat, but neither Cessilia or her father sat. The War God removed his cape and threw it on the seat, and added wood to the fire with a dark expression. Cessilia was standing behind him, but after a while, she gently grabbed one of his hands with hers.

“Father... I want t-to go t-to the East... Eastern K-Kingdom,” she muttered.

“Why?”

His question had come right away, with something strong in his voice. It didn't sound like anger, just... determination. Yassim was surprised he hadn't even been asked anything yet, but for the War God, only his daughter seemed to be here. He turned to her, and it was truly moving to see such an imposing and strong man have such tender gestures towards the young woman.

“...I r-...really want t-to go,” simply said Cessilia.

Although she had a tiny and hesitant voice, her green eyes were full of determination, and unafraid to hold her father's dark gaze, too.

“K-King Ashen asked t-to see me,” she resumed. “I... I want t-to go.”

“To see you?”

This time, the War God's words were directed at Yassim, and so was his terrifying glare. The old man bowed quickly, his throat tight, but he ought to at least stay something.

“P-Princess Cessilia is invited by... His Majesty, in hopes of... standing as his queen.”

“...His Queen,” repeated the War God.

His voice was deep, and his emotions even harder to decipher. Yassim was silently praying to every god and goddess he knew, and hoping he'd be given to see his plan succeed or fail. If only he could bring Princess Cessilia to his Majesty, then perhaps, there was hope... For now though, the mountain standing before him was no other than the War God, and a father who cherished his daughter deeply. Yassim was truly having a hard time understanding how those people were thinking, but he was already shocked to see the War God hadn't yet kicked him out or killed him. Instead, his eyes were still on Cessilia, perhaps conflicted. Was his daughter's hopeful gaze making him really consider this insane request?

“...What did your mother say?”

“M-mother said I c-could d-decide and live my own ad-dventure,” quickly answered Cessilia. “She a...agreed. D-Dad, please...”

The War God let out a long sigh, and it felt as if a gush of hot wind was running through the room to echo his frustration. Yassim wasn't cold anymore; he was sweating profusely. However, the War God raised his hand to gently caress his daughter's cheek. Then, his fingers went down on her neck covered by her golden choker, and he frowned even more.

"...Don't do anything you don't want to," he suddenly said.

"I know, D-dad."

"Don't let anyone touch you, insult you or annoy you. If they do, punish them. Do not be scared, Cessi. Even if you kill him, it's fine. If you want to burn their whole country down, it's fine."

Yassim was on the verge of passing out from hearing this, but Cessilia simply chuckled.

"I und-derstand."

"...Take Krai with you."

"D-dad, is it alright? It's your d-dragon..."

Her father didn't answer, but a loud growl resonated outside. Yassim couldn't believe what he was hearing. The black dragon was not just going to bring them there, he was going to stay with the Princess all along? The War God's legendary dragon itself!

Yassim suddenly met the War God's eyes, and the dark gaze immediately changed into a life-threatening glare. The old man froze in utter fear instead of bowing again.

"...If anything happens to Cessi, you're all dead."

He had said that with an incredible calm, yet his ice-cold voice left no doubt.

The Eastern Kingdom's fate now entirely relied on the well-being and future of that one young woman. Yassim bowed and heard himself thank the War God, but in his heart, he knew he had sealed his own country's future. Either his plan succeeded, or they would now be doomed for real...