

## The White King's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 6

### #6 The Eastern Kingdom

For an old man like Yassim, being able to sleep on a thick, comfortable mattress was a luxury. He certainly hadn't expected to be so well received in the Onyx Castle, the War God's residence. That servant woman named Nebora had shown him the bedroom he was to stay in after the dinner, and he had been shocked to see such a nice room had been prepared for him, in such a short time, with even a fireplace bringing its dancing glow. Hence, it was no wonder he had fallen right asleep there, completely surrendering to his own exhaustion.

He was woken up early by gentle knocks on the door, and it took him a few seconds to remember where he was, and what he was doing there... The fire had long been extinguished, and the room was cold and dark.

"Good morning," said Nebora with a soft voice. "Did you sleep well? The girls are almost ready to leave, we wanted to let you sleep for as long as possible, but I fear time is up. You can still join Tessa for breakfast, though."

"Ah yes, thank you, Lady Nebora..."

The servant woman nodded, and went to open the windows, but for some reason, Yassim found she was a bit cold towards him. He quickly grabbed his coat to put it back on with a shiver, and washed his face with the little basin of warm water she had brought, brushing his beard quickly, and trying to arrange the few white hairs scattered on his scalp.

"Your King..."

He was surprised to hear her address him all of a sudden. The woman approached him with a severe expression.

"He'd better be a good man," she said. "I've watched those girls grow up, I helped their mothers raise them. I love them like my own. I may only be a servant, but trust me, your King should fear me as much as those dragons if anything happens to either one of them."

"I-I understand, my Lady," muttered Yassim.

After she was done talking, Nebora put back on a polite smile with an impressive calm, and walked out of the room, leaving him stunned. The women in the Dragon Empire were clearly as fiery as the dragons!

Yassim let out a short sigh, but quickly prepared himself, as he was worried about making the young ladies wait for him. He only had his coat and shoes to put back on,

but as he did, he felt a bit nervous. Since they were flying back to his Eastern Kingdom, he couldn't help but wonder if he would make it to the end of the day. A lot of things were bound to happen, and he could only pray for the better outcome...

Preventing himself from thinking too much, he walked out of the bedroom, noticing how dark the castle was, despite the sky being lit by the moonlight. He hadn't really paid much attention before, but the walls were as dark as the Castle's name... could it really be onyx though? He didn't even dare touch it to test his theory. Resolute, Yassim found his way back downstairs, noticing his muscles weren't so sore anymore. Truly, a good night's sleep was the best remedy at his age...

"Morning!" Exclaimed Tessa when he stepped into the large salon from the previous night.

Just like Nebora had said, the young woman was having her breakfast, a large selection of dried and fresh fruits, nuts, and cereals displayed before her. Quickly greeting her, Yassim walked to pour himself some tea. He was too nervous to be hungry, and could only sit on the edge of a stool, watching her eat ferociously.

"Everything is packed and ready," she said, her mouth half full. "We'll get going soon!"

"That's great... What about Lady Cessilia?"

"She's already outside. She's talking with her dad."

"I see."

Yassim didn't dare ask anymore, so he quietly drank his tea, letting Tessa enjoy her breakfast in silence. He was a bit nervous, but already grateful they had let him sleep. Judging how her outfit was completely different, a thicker one with a long black coat, the girls had been up for a while already.

He waited until Tessa was done eating to stand up with her and, without a word, they both walked back to the Castle's entrance. In the sky, the first purple waves were announcing the sunrise already. The black dragon was standing in the middle of the castle courtyard, several baggages fastened on his back, eating a large chunk of raw meat. This time, a couple of saddles had been put on his back, and Yassim realized this was probably meant for him. However, his eyes didn't stay on the dragon long; further away, two silhouettes were cut by the first lights of sunrise.

The War God was talking to his daughter, the two of them facing each other closely. Yassim couldn't hear what was said, but he could see the big green eyes of Cessilia on her father, full of tenderness. As if he couldn't bear to part with his daughter yet, the War God had his large hand on her cheek, also staring at her with a serious expression. Yassim felt a little pinch in his heart, seeing this. He had never had the blessing to

conceive any children himself, but this scene could bring this old man a lot of emotions, just by witnessing it from afar...

He only had a little satchel for himself, but Tessa brought another bag to put on the dragon's back while he stood there, a bit unsure what to do next. The large creature didn't seem to mind carrying all that at all. His long tail merely wagged a bit as the young woman climbed on his back to secure everything once more.

"Did you take your thicker coats?" Asked Nebora, coming out of the castle behind him. "It's going to be colder up there!"

"Yes!" Shouted Tessa, patting one of the bags.

"This one is for you," the servant woman suddenly said to him.

To Yassim's surprise, he had to open his arms at the last second to receive a thick, heavy fur cape. This was one of the most magnificent pieces of clothing he had ever received! This was definitely made of a bear's fur, and held with some leather straps, yet they casually gave this to him?

"I-I can't accept such a valuable gift..." He muttered, feeling the weight of that gift in his hands.

"Just take it," said Nebora. "It's merely a little coat. With everything the boys hunt, we have dozens like this, so don't worry about it."

Once again, he was astonished by the difference of wealth and strength. The War God's sons could hunt large beasts like these and gift away fur coats as if it was nothing? It was too impressive! In the Eastern Kingdom, the wars and fires had chased a lot of their fauna away from their former habitats, making such hunting prizes extremely rare and valuable... Still, he accepted the gift, bowing a couple of times, and put it on his back. This was indeed very warm, and heavy on his old bones!

A few steps away, Cessilia hugged her father one last time, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. Then, they slowly parted, the War God's hand falling.

"Mother will be b-back soon," she promised in a whisper.

"...I know."

She gifted him with a smile, and slowly walked up to Krai. There, she met poor Yassim, a bit lost in this situation.

"Let's g-go," she said, climbing up.

Yassim was definitely nervous to ride the black dragon again, but as they said, the second time could never be worse than the first... Hence, he did his best to climb behind her on the mighty creature, trying to imitate her movements until he saw Tessa's hand extended to help him up.

The three of them were finally on the black dragon's back, and Yassim was brutally reminded how tall that creature was... From there, the War God seemed a bit small all of a sudden. The Prince walked up to his dragon, suddenly grabbing its snout and pulling it to him. The creature had still been busy licking and curating the last bits of its meal just a second ago, and growled. The War God stared at the creature, and the next second, the red eyes got a bit less intimidating, staring at its owner with curiosity.

"Watch over them," simply said the War God.

The Dragon stayed quiet for a couple seconds, before letting out a long, high-pitched growl. Then, the Prince's eyes went up, to meet his daughter's again. Seated at the back, Yassim couldn't see what Cessillia looked like but, the next second, the black dragon suddenly jumped up in the air.

If he hadn't already been holding on to the saddle, Yassim would have been thrown off. The dragon climbed fast and high, its large wings violently flapping the air around as it rose higher and higher. The cold morning wind slapping his face suddenly had Yassim realize how grateful he was for that thick coat... The two girls in front of him also wore similar ones, although theirs were made of precious snow leopard fur, white with the characteristic black prints. Yassim also suddenly understood their change of hairstyle: Tessa had bound her little braids around her hair to keep it from flying in all directions, and Cessilia, too, had several little gold chains circling all around to keep it down. Because they were flying higher than before, the wind and cold was much stronger. When he finally dared to look down, Yassim recognized the Onyx Castle as a little black point below.

"We're right on time for sunrise!" Exclaimed Tessa, excited.

Indeed, they were. Right ahead, the tip of the sun had just appeared on the sea, glowing brightly and sending warm colors into the sky ahead. Yassim was struck by this view. He had seen the sun rise before, many, many times in his life. However, never had he been given to witness such a view, from the sky.

He could see the miles and miles of sea ahead, its deep blue shades scattering all around the lands. Even more amazing, he was able, for the first time, to see his homeland from the sky. It was extraordinary. It was like looking at a living map, and he could actually recognize the lines many cultured people had tried to accurately copy on those maps. The many rivers that crossed their Kingdom, scattered like a spider's web into thinner or thicker blue trails.

"This is our first time flying above our country," said Tessa. "We were never allowed to cross past the border before..."

"...Welcome to the Eastern Kingdom, my Ladies," nodded Yassim, a bit proud.

"C-can you t-tell us more about it?" Asked Cessilia, sitting at the front.

"Of course. There are three main rivers crossing our lands. The one most north is called Pseha. Then, the second one, in the middle, is the one with the most ramifications, Soura. And then, the one at the bottom, the largest one that continues to your Empire, is Riva."

"Riva?" Repeated Tessa. "It's called Keriva in our Empire, and one of the most dangerous ones. All the places around are swamps..."

"Oh, not many of our people live in the south either. Our villages are mostly gathered around the two other rivers. A lot of our diet resolves around what our fishermen trap there."

"The villages s-seem located t-towards the sea..." Noticed Cessilia, her eyes looking down.

"Yes, my Lady. We even have many islands further east, although not many people live there. They get submerged when the Sea Goddess rises, but we use them to teach our children how to swim, bring our cattle to eat, and put traps to hunt bigger prey."

Yassim suddenly pointed further down below them.

"See this island, in the Soura bed? It is where our King's Castle is, and our Capital, Aestara."

"Aestara..."

The said island was growing bigger, as Krai was slowly starting its descent. They could now see the very, very large river bed, and the many little islands in it. It wasn't the sea, as there was a clear line following the coast, showing where the sea actually started. Miles and miles of beaches, yet, there was a clear opening where Soura started, as if the ground had been split apart to let the river through. Among all the islands present, it was easy to guess which one was the Capital: it was the largest, and the one towards which all the other buildings seemed turned to. However, for a few seconds, the girls didn't understand where the castle was actually located, until they understood.

It wasn't just an island among the others; this one was actually topped by a mountain-like city. Like a large cone, with many buildings in the lower parts, and, at the very top, a castle.

"It's... a tidal island?" Asked Cessilia.

"Exactly, my Lady. Centuries ago, our ancestors took notice that this rocky formation looked like a mountain rising from the sea, and would be a perfect place to defend while also seeing all around our lands. They started by building a watchtower, but, as time passed, and we relied more and more heavily on the rivers, the tower was made part of a castle, and more buildings appeared all around."

Cessilia could see that Watchtower. Actually, despite the magnificent castle built all around, in white stone and large windows, the tower was fiercely standing out, its arrow proudly pointing at the sky. Even the colored glass windows didn't seem to outshine the golden arrow at the top, glowing even more under the sunrise.

"...it's beautiful," she whispered.

"With your capital so far away, who knew you guys would have dared to come all the way to wage war with us!" Scoffed Tessa.

"We still have quite a few buildings closer to the border," admitted Yassim. "Some are still used as the army's main base, but it has changed greatly over the... last couple of decades..."

Although a bit too blunt, he knew the young woman was perfectly right. They clearly had no interests near the border, as they had focused most of the population, commerce and cities to the south-east corner of their Kingdom, away from the western border. However, it was a horrible decision that had been taken by the wrong people, in dire circumstances. Two decades ago or so, their once Republic was completely drained, out of resources. The Dragon Empire couldn't have known about the diseases, the drained rivers, and the hunger that had driven their people mad. Those two girls had probably never experienced hunger themselves...

Yet, Yassim was surprised by the way Cessilia was looking down at the land below them. It looked like she was learning, analyzing each river, each piece of land silently... He had already felt that upon meeting the young woman, but she didn't seem as candid as one would have expected a lady her age to be. Sometimes, there was a strange loneliness in her eyes, and the impression of someone who had gone through a lot, rather than a young, sheltered princess.

"Old man, where do we land?" Asked Tessa over her shoulder. "This guy needs a large spot to go, or we're going to scare everyone in the middle of the city plaza!"

"Head to the tower," nodded Yassim. "On the lower left side, there's a little courtyard with a lot of ivy leaves and a mosaic on the floor. There should be enough space for the... for us to land."

"Got it!"

He realized Tessa and Cessilia had been directing the dragon all this time, with small taps or words. Once again, Cessilia leaned forward, whispered something to the dragon, and he changed direction, headed for the spot Yassim had indicated.

As relieved as he was to be home, poor Yassim was also getting more and more nervous, as if riding a gigantic, mythical creature hadn't been enough emotions already for that morning. Below them, life in the Eastern Kingdom seemed to be going as it should be, with the people slowly waking up to another morning. Perhaps some would get a fright upon noticing the dark silhouette of a dragon in the sky...

Finally, Krai softly landed in that courtyard that was actually just big enough for him. Tessa helped Yassim down, and Cessilia got down on the other side. They were in a pretty courtyard, with, as Yassim had described, lots of ivy climbing down the walls and little pillars all around them. There was a little water fountain to the side, and Krai went to drink some of it right away while Cessilia patted his neck.

"It d-does feel d-different from home," she said. "More... humid."

"Well, we are surrounded by water, my lady. This area is actually where some of the future doctors come to study, and I live here myself."

"This is your home?" Asked Tessa, surprised.

"Well, the Castle is home to all of his Majesty's Entourage, including the Counsellors, like myself."

"Oh, so you're like our Aunt Phemera," nodded Tessa. "She's our Empress' advisor too, and she lives in the Palace because of that..."

"Yes, my Lady."

Although, from what he had observed, the Imperial Palace of the Dragon Empire was at least three or four times bigger than this castle... Yassim was glad it was too soon for any student to be here. Their arrival probably hadn't been unnoticed. He let out a long sigh while the girls took off their coats, leaving them on Krai's back among their other belongings.

"What now?" Asked Tessa. "Will you give us a tour, or..."

She didn't get to finish her sentence, and instead, turned towards the ruckus that was happening at one end of the courtyard. Despite their outfits being different from the ones used in the Empire, those men were clearly guards. Yassim swallowed his saliva, while four men lined up, taking out their swords in a defensive stance.

“Former Royal Counselor Yassim, the King requests your immediate presence in the Throne Room! You shall explain yourself for your return upon your exile ordered by the King, as well as bringing in foreigners, and their... their b-beast.”

The man’s eyes went on Krai, filled by fear. He was doing his best not to show it, but as soon as the Dragon’s red eyes went on him, he couldn’t help but slightly change his position, ready to step back or protect himself. Krai didn’t care much though; he was busy sniffing one of the pillars and its climbing plants.

Meanwhile, Cessilia and Tessa both turned towards Yassim, the latter putting her hands on her hips.

“...Forgot to tell us something, Old man?” She groaned.

“My Ladies,” sighed Yassim. “From now on, I will have to rely on your understanding...”