

The White King's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 8

#8 The Candidates

The two cousins exchanged a quick glance, both disturbed. They had never seen anyone with a skin color this close to their mothers' before. There had been a brief trend about women trying to lighten their skin, but it wasn't anything like they were witnessing now. This woman by the King's side was clearly mixed, like them, and more fair-skinned than dark. Although her hair was more likely to be artificially tainted, she couldn't fake her skin color so easily, nor how her traits were reminiscent of a long-forgotten race of people, the same race both Tessa and Cessilia were descendants of.

The Rain Tribe.

"Welcome, Your Highness," she said with that beautiful smile. "...and... I suppose I'm talking to the famous traitor, Sir Yassim. It must have been a long journey back from the Dragon Empire."

The way she spoke, in a gentle and whispery manner, was troubling. Something in Cessilia's mind told her this woman was acting polite, but not friendly. Even her attitude as she stood next to the King spoke volumes. She had no fear, and displayed her pride and self-confidence without an ounce of hesitation.

Tessa glared at Yassim, hoping they'd get an explanation for this too, but the old man looked baffled. From that woman's speech, he had visibly never met her in person. However, anyone could see how familiar she was with the King. If it had been the Dragon Empire, she surely would have been some sort of Concubine, but in here, the girls were unsure. Everything was new, they couldn't be sure of anything. The rules and customs ought to be different from their homeland...

Instead, Tessa glanced around. In fact, all the nobles present were either ignoring that woman, or looking upset by her. So she wasn't too popular with anyone here... Yet, she stood by the King's side like this?

Meanwhile, Cessilia was still staring at the odd couple facing her. Her expression had changed, and her green eyes showed something bitter compared to before.

As a few seconds passed in silence, the red-haired woman sighed.

"Looks like I ruined the mood here. I am Jisel, the King's attendant..."

Tessa raised an eyebrow. What attendant, this woman was clearly the King's mistress already.

The King suddenly turned around, and sat back on his throne with a sullen expression. He was still staring at Cessilia, and hadn't reacted at all to Jisel's appearance, but it

didn't seem to matter. The red-haired woman kept her perfect smile on, and took a step back, standing just one foot behind the throne, her hands behind her back.

"Enough," groaned the King. "Resume."

In just two words, the whole atmosphere had changed, every noble in the room eager to please. The soldiers that were flanking Yassim quickly moved aside, leaving the old man free for now. His shoulders visibly relaxed, but Yassim didn't forget his primary mission. He was about to gently guide Cessilia and her cousin to the side, when Jisel spoke up.

"Ah, the guests should take the empty seats. We aren't waiting for anyone."

Although that seemed like an innocent and considerate couple of sentences, both girls noticed how Yassim's expression fell while hearing this, and the other nobles looked down too. Neither Cessilia nor Tessa moved, waiting for the old man to indicate how to react. Yassim silently clenched his fist, and nodded penibly.

"...I see."

"I'll s-stand," suddenly said Cessilia.

All eyes turned to her, visibly surprised not by her stutter, but by how openly she defied the King's woman's offer. She didn't even look her way, or wasn't looking towards the King anymore. Instead, she simply stood next to the old Yassim as he had moved aside, actually standing next to those two empty seats.

Tessa nodded, and did the same, both young women standing behind Yassim. They weren't so blind as to ignore what was going on completely. There were nine seats in this room, aside from the King's, and Yassim had mentioned nine lords during their trip there. Judging from his shattered reaction and Jisel's words, they could easily imagine what had happened, and why they shouldn't sit in those seats. The reactions of the nobles weren't all the same this time. Some kept staring at them, visibly intrigued, some subtly nodded, and some shook their heads.

"As you wish," chuckled Jisel.

One of the nobles standing sighed, and stepped forward, taking the middle spot of the room they had stood in just before.

"Your Highness, with the addition of Princess Cessilia from the Dragon Empire, it makes a total of ten candidates as to whom your future Queen might be."

The King wasn't looking at the old man at all. Instead, his eyes were still fixated towards the Princess, as he wouldn't even blink, with a frown on.

Cessilia however, wasn't staring his way at all anymore. She was slightly leaning towards Yassim, who had just whispered to her.

"This is Counsellor Yamino, an old friend. He is a good man."

Tessa and Cessillia slightly nodded, listening to Counselor Yamino's words.

"I shall repeat the agreement for the Princess of the Dragon Empire to hear. According to the rules agreed by the... Seven Noble Families, each family and Royal Counsellors are free to introduce any young woman of marriageable age as a King's Candidate. Each Candidate and her family shall receive ten thousand silver coins as compensation."

Tessa silently smirked, glancing to the side to see which of the nobles had reacted to that sentence. So some of them had probably traded their daughters for some silver money...

"Each Candidate will receive a room and stay for at least a month within the Castle. During the time spent here, the Candidates are free to access any area of the Castle they please and use their free time as they will. However, they have the obligation to attend all the social events organized by the Royal Castle, the official meetings like this one, and obey each of the King's orders. Any refusal or miss to any of the forth mentioned rules will result in an elimination of the candidate, who will be sent home, and have all the previous rewards confiscated."

Cessilia grimaced, and so did her cousin. They had to obey all of the King's orders? This rule felt horribly ominous...

"His Majesty will select his future bride among the candidates. The family of the chosen candidate will receive, among other presents, ten thousand gold coins and eternal glory. The new Queen will be the official Queen of our Eastern Kingdom, and mother to all the official heirs to the Throne. She will assume all the responsibilities of her rank and position, and be the King's left hand in all but military matters."

Another rule that the War God's daughter and niece did not appreciate at all. All but military matters? Now that they looked around them, all the women present looked very fragile and delicate. None of them looked like they could lift a weapon...

The Counselor took a deep breath, briefly glancing towards Cessilia before resuming.

"Today is the Final Call for all the Selected Candidates. If one candidate or her family wishes to give up, this is the last chance before they are officially entered. No punishment will be held against those who chose to retract now. I will call the names of each candidate and have them confirm, as well as their families."

One by one, the Counsellor called out each of the Candidates. Surprisingly enough, they all answered loud and clear their will to partake in this competition for the Queen's title, but only half of the said candidates seemed to actually be present here, aside from Cessilia. In each case, a member of the family gave an excuse for their candidate not to be there, claiming she was ill or still on her way, and no one discussed this. Cessilia felt out of place listening to this. She hadn't thought she was walking into a competition with other women... and she didn't feel like it at all.

"Cessi, we can go home," whispered Tessa as the Counselor was still calling out the others. "This is ridiculous, you're a Princess, there's no reason for you to compete for that crazy guy..."

Cessilia knew where her cousin's opinion came from. This indeed felt very foolish. However, now, it was clear her fate was intertwined with Yassim's. Moreover, there were still too many questions pending, including why Jisel wasn't called among the candidates. Cessilia had listened. For each candidate, they mentioned her name and her family's, but Jisel never spoke, and everyone seemed to forget her for a few seconds. She wasn't among the competitors...

"...The ninth Candidate is Lady Naptune, introduced by myself, and my niece is willingly partaking in this, she will arrive tomorrow. Finally, uh..."

Yassim glanced towards Cessilia. He knew his life was in her hands, and so did she. Their eyes met, and the young woman slightly nodded. The old man didn't hide the wave of relief in his eyes, instead looking infinitely grateful. He turned to his former colleague, and stepped forward.

"The tenth candidate is Imperial Princess Cessilia of the Dragon Empire, introduced by myself, former Counsellor Yassim."

"...Princess Cessilia," called out one of the Nine Lords. "Are you really going to participate?"

"Yes," nodded the Princess.

She hadn't stuttered, nor was she hiding from their gazes. Instead, all the nobles quickly tried to glance the King's way. Ashen had his hand covering his mouth, but his eyes were still fixated on the Princess. It was hard to understand what he was thinking, except for the way his fist was clenched on his throne...

"Well, we have ten candidates then," nodded Counsellor Yamino. "A party will be given tomorrow night to celebrate the Candidates' arrival to the Castle."

Suddenly, the King stood, and all the nobles seated stood one second after him. It was like a storm had suddenly broken into the room, putting everyone present in survival mode. Some were frozen by fear, others looked ready to run away. There was a general

movement of stepping away from the throne, and the man standing a step in front of it. However, Ashen didn't say anything. He stood there for a couple more seconds, like a statue of ice with eyes of fire. After one last glare in Yassim and Cessilia's way, he suddenly stormed out of the room.

No one said a word, and it took a couple of seconds after he was gone for anything to be heard, anyone to dare move. It had all happened so quickly, not everyone had understood what had happened.

The only one who could still keep a smile on was Jisel. If she had been shocked by the King's sudden burst, no one had seen it. She still had her little smile on, and her eyes met Cessilia's. The Princess already didn't like that woman, like a lioness who knew she was faced with a rival. Jisel gave her a little wink, and quietly walked out while everyone else still seemed stunned.

The second person to react was Yassim. He turned around, and looked at the two women.

"Let's go," he quietly muttered.

They both followed him as he quickly left the room, visibly needing to run away. They had barely walked out when a loud banter exploded inside, many people shouting after the Old Man and calling him.

Yassim didn't pay any attention to them, and guided the two women out instead. He looked like he finally could control the situation a bit, and was guiding them away, through the corridors and further away from the previous room. After a little while, they seemed sufficiently far, although it was only one floor below. He let out a long sigh, a bit out of breath after this speed walking.

"What was that!" Exploded Tessa, visibly unable to hold it in anymore. "A competition to be that crazy bastard's wife? Old man, I should be the one to cut your neck right now!"

"T-Tessa, c-calm down," muttered Cessilia.

"Cessi, I'm not going to calm down! That old schmuck lied to us, and now you have to compete with nine other crazy girls, probably forced to do this at that? And you guys think we are barbaric! Our fathers don't even dare take concubines, and you want to make Cessi beg for this Tyrant to marry her while he's already got that red slut on the side!"

"I swear to the gods I had no idea about that woman," said Yassim. "I... I had heard rumors the King had taken a mistress in after I was dismissed, but I never met that woman before."

"She's not a c-candidate?" Asked Cessilia, ignoring her furious cousin.

“One needs a strong backing to be appointed a candidate, my Lady,” said Yassim. “All the women presented before belong to the strongest families of the Kingdom, and even the two Counselors who also introduced candidates are very wealthy men. I wouldn’t have been able to pick anyone but you.”

“So you came to our Empire to trick Cessi into this mess,” groaned Tessa. “Now you’re really going to lose your neck, old man. Just you wait until our family hears the-”

“T-Tessa,” said Cessilia, suddenly stepping up to her. “S-stop, please. I-I am fine.”

Because Cessilia asked her to calm down so frantically, her cousin frowned, tilting her head. She crossed her arms.

“...Cessi, why did you agree to this?”

But instead of answering, her cousin stayed mute, and slowly shook her long locks. Tessa noticed her green gaze.

This was the glance Cessilia would make sometimes, when there was something she couldn’t say. It was a look she knew all too well, but it broke her heart each time. Ever since that had happened to her cousin, Tessa could tell there was something horribly sad and dark buried in her cousin’s heart, trapped in a chest Cessilia always refused to open. Each time she got close to that chest, Cessilia did this. Those sad eyes, and her voice that disappeared... As if she was asking her not to ask anymore. This had to be related to what had happened with the King just before, in that room... Tessa was the first one shocked by it. She thought she knew almost everything about Cessilia, but never had she seen her like that. For perhaps the first time, something in that glass shell had happened. A crack, perhaps. A little, shy opening into that tightly closed chest...

Tessa took a long breath, trying to keep it in and calm down.

“...Fine,” she grumbled. “But I’m going to make you pay for that later, old man. Or I’m just going to wait for Kassian and Darsan to hear this and come and slice you, and watch.”

“Thank you for your benevolence, lady Tessa...” muttered the poor Yassim. “And once again, I apologize for lying to you like this, Lady Cessilia. However, please know I didn’t do this to trick you, but because I had good reasons to believe my King would... have special feelings for someone from the Dragon Empire.”

“What?” Muttered Tessa, confused.

Yassim kept staring at Cessilia, visibly expecting something, but the Princess remained mute. If she wasn’t curious to know what he meant like her cousin, it meant she probably knew the truth... and his theory was right.

“Alright... Let’s move to your new room,” said Yassim, understanding he wouldn’t get an answer now. “I am an humble ex-Counselor, but I am sure Counselor Yamino will help me arrange something decent for the Princess and Lady Tessa. You two are technically of higher standing than any of the candidates, after all...”

“It won’t be necessary,” suddenly said Counselor Yamino’s voice.

The man had just appeared, looking a bit out of breath too. He took a second to catch his breath, as he was much more massive than the old Yassim. In fact, Yamino was so large his belly almost touched both sides of the corridor. He did look like a good, nice man though, with his head as round as his belly, and his little white curly goatee.

“Counselor Yamino!” Exclaimed Yassim, visibly happy to see his friend again.

“You sure still run fast, Yassim,” sighed Yamino. “You’re one crazy old man, to come back after making his Highness so furious... and from the Dragon Empire, too.”

“You know me,” replied Yassim with a little smile. “I will never give up on our dear homeland.”

“Ha... If only our young King could still find mercy for old antiques like us. Anyways! The Princess and her...”

“Cousin,” said Tessa. “I’m Tessa, by the way.”

“Oh, nice to meet you, Lady Tessa. And of course, Lady Cessilia as well. I am Yamino, the oldest Counselor, and the last one mad enough to still be friends with Yassim... or perhaps, lucky enough, seeing he’s still got his head on his shoulders... I came to tell you the ladies are welcome in the Cerulean Suite.”

“The Cerulean Suite?” Repeated Yassim, surprised. “But... It’s the best room in the Castle! No one has been allowed to use it since the previous King’s favorite! How did you manage to...”

“Oh, I didn’t do anything! It’s an order of the King himself. He ordered the servants to prepare and give that room to the Princess... To Princess Cessilia.”