

# The White King's Favorite

## Chapter 21-25

### Chapter 21

The dragon that had climbed on the pile of rocks tilted its head just as the two young men jumped off. They both slid down the mountain of rocks easily, jumping when needed, making the ride down look like child's play. Once they got closer, it became obvious they were actually pretty tall and muscular as well. As they had stayed behind, both Jisel and Naptunie watched the two young men come down, noticing their striking resemblance to Cessilia. "Cessi!" shouted the first of them, running to hug her. Even the tall Cessilia suddenly looked petite in his large, bulky arms. This man was tall, extremely muscular, and had his dark hair organized in rogue braids over his shoulders. He had a little scar covered with dark yellow scales on his cheek and many more on his body. He had a youthful look to him, with his big, black eyes, his hairless, square chin, and that large smile stuck on his face. He made Cessilia spin in the air, hugging her like an excited child, but Cessilia was just as happy to see them.

"How c-come you're here?" Cessilia asked the man behind him.

"Well, when I came back from the north, as soon as I heard Dad had agreed for you to come here, I decided to come and check up on my little sister and cousin. I just happened to fly over some mountain this idiot was still busy on... Come on, let her go for a sec."

He tapped his brother's shoulder until Darsan finally put his sister down and stepped aside, letting Kassian hug her next. Their hug was very different from the excited one with Darsan. He smiled at her, gently kissed the top of her head, and embraced her fully in his arms, gently but firmly. They didn't move, just hugging each other in silence for a few seconds.

Although they looked a lot alike, the brothers were completely different. Kassian was actually a bit thinner and a couple of inches shorter than Darsan, and his hair was cut short, except for a couple of braids on his neck. He also wore a simple leather ensemble, while Darsan had half of his armor on, and an extra fur coat too.

Next to them, Darsan turned to Tessandra.

"What came over you?!" he exclaimed. "Coming here? With Cessi? What the heck?!"

"Hey, Cessi had boyfriend issues to settle. I just tagged along for her security."

"What security?! You both look like you got into a mud fight with a dragon and lost! ...Wait a minute. Is that my sword?"

Hey, that is my sword! What in the hell did you do with it?! It was all pretty and sharpened, what did you do to my precious beauty?! And where... By the fucking dragon's balls, Tessandra, where is the other one?!"

"Sorry," she shrugged, "I lost it. This one's fine, though. Just needs a bit of cleaning..."

"Lost it? How could you lose it?! It was my favorite!"

While Tessandra and Darsan were bickering, Cessilia and Kassian finally parted, looking at each other with the same smile.

Just then, the silver-scaled dragon growled loudly on top of the rocks and jumped down as well. Its long body made

every movement look very elegant, and its small wings flapped so it barely even touched the rocks at all. When it landed, it

began to growl loudly, curling its body in circles around Cessilia.

"Kian!" she exclaimed, hugging the large snout. "I missed you t-too!"

"By the way..."

Darsan cleared his throat, looking a bit embarrassed.

"I hope there was no friend of yours out there? Because they were not welcoming, so I had to have a little bit of a...

fists-first kind of chat with them."

"Nope," sighed Tessandra, "pretty much everyone wants to kill us at the moment."

Darsan grimaced, turning back to Cessilia.

"...It's that bad?"

She nodded, and glanced toward Ashen's body, lying by the lake. Kassian followed her glance, and when he recognized the young man, he sighed.

"...Oh."

"I'm g-glad you're here," muttered Cessilia.

"Don't worry," said Kassian, caressing her hair. "It's going to be alright. Darsan, help me move that guy."

The two of them walked directly toward Ashen's body, carefully lifting him up. They had glanced toward Jisel and

Nana, but without Cessilia or Tessandra to make the introductions, they only nodded briefly and kept moving to focus on Ashen.

As soon as they looked away from her, Naptunie almost ran to Cessilia's side.

"Those are your big brothers? They really look so much like you! They are so tall too!

And this new dragon... It's such a pretty one!"

"His name is K-Kian," said Cessilia, patting the silver-scaled dragon.

"He's bigger than Sir Dragon, isn't he? Or is it just that its body is longer?"

"He's larger," said Jisel, who had approached cautiously, her eyes on the Silver Dragon, "...but it's a water dragon. So

his body is longer than it is large..."

She looked like she couldn't help but stare at the dragon, with a hint of sadness in her eyes. Cessilia suddenly realized

Kian was probably around the size Jinn should have been if its owner had not died. She still had very mixed feelings toward that woman, but, bit by bit, she felt like she was starting to unveil those layers Jisel had hidden within.

Soon enough, her brothers returned. They were using Darsan's fur coat as a stretcher. Cessilia's heart tightened as she saw Ashen, lying there in a poor state.

"...Let's get you out of here," muttered Kassian.

Quickly, he and Darsan secured Ashen on Kian's back, and Cessilia and Tessandra helped Nana climb on top.

"...You getting on or what?" Tessandra asked Jisel.

"...I'll be fine," she grunted.

"Fine. Your call. I ain't nice enough to offer twice."

Darsan and Kassian exchanged a look, probably intrigued by the situation, but nobody said a thing. Instead, Kian

suddenly grabbed Jisel between its claws, making the woman scream in fright, and jumped in the air. It was a quick, but

thrilling little trip to the outside world. Nana, who was just starting to get used to this, had to hold on because of all the loops

her stomach made in a quick time span. Kian landed easily, less than a minute later, on the cave's beach. It was still raining

quite a bit, and the sand was drenched and all muddy, but it was nothing like the downpour earlier. Jisel squirmed out of the

dragon's clutch, looking a complete mess, and took several steps back, as if scared by the creature.

"I said I was fine!"

"...You're welcome," grunted Kassian, giving her a disdainful look.

On the beach, Darsan had indeed reduced the numbers of their enemies by a significant amount. Some men were still

lying in their own blood, most alive but clearly in no state to fight. They even retreated, crawling as far away as they could

from Kian and the passengers on its back. On one side of the cave's opening, though, Jinn the Red Dragon suddenly came out,

limping, with an injured front paw. Jisel immediately went to her dragon, patting its snout in a comforting manner.

Kian growled after the other dragon, and Jinn did the same, each dragon warning one another. Under the moonlight,

Kian's shiny silver scales were even more impressive, and the dragon's body seemed a bit bigger as well. Jinn kept growling,

but also retreated, staying close to Jisel. She didn't say anything, standing by her dragon with a sullen expression.

"...Where are we going?" asked Kassian, his eyes glaring at that woman.

"We need to g-get him healed as soon as p-possible," muttered Cessilia.

"To the docks!" said Naptunie. "I'm sure we can find someone from my family to help us!"

"Anywhere c-close will be fine," nodded Cessilia.

“Alright. Hold on.”

Without another look at the beach, Kian got into the water, floating happily as if the dragon was in its element. The sea was calm despite the rain, and the dragon’s silver scales shined from the faintest streaks of moonlight. Its body was undulating, remaining close to the seashore, but behind the line of houses, and unless someone was standing at the edge or on a higher viewpoint, no one would spot them.

The trip to the docks was fairly short, but on the way there, what they saw of the Capital shocked them. Kassian even urged Kian to slow down and remain where the dragon would be mostly hidden. There was a lot of movement in the streets, too much for the late hour and in such bad weather. They could see men running with torches and swords, people shouting, sounds of swords clashing.

“...What’s going on?” muttered Nana, worried.

They listened for a few more seconds, but the more they did, the clearer and more depressing the situation was.

“It sounds like the Yekara are taking control of the city,” grunted Tessandra. “I suggest we lay low for now...”

“What?” exclaimed Nana. “What about my family? The tribe? A-and everyone?”

“Let’s just g-go quietly,” said Cessilia, exchanging a glance with her brother.

Kassian nodded, and sure enough, Kian quietly let them off between two boats on the dock, but even there, the situation

was tense. They could see the Yekara going from door to door, loudly banging on them and forcing the owners to open, arguing with people.

“Well, sounds like they are searching for someone,” Darsan said, tilting his head.

Four annoyed pairs of eyes on him made him grimace.

“Oh... Sorry. Got it.”

“...I think we can get home,” muttered Naptunie, glancing around.

“It might not be safe for your family, Nana,” Tessandra warned her. “We don’t know what the Yekara will do if they find us there.”

“Don’t worry! My house is big and I’m sure we can hide.”

Before they could protest, Naptunie went out first, tip-toeing to one of the large houses by the seashore. The docks were

calm compared to the streets, but if anyone had looked up at the wrong moment from the street, they could easily be spotted.

They put Ashen on Darsan’s back at the rear and quickly followed Nana to her house.

There was a back door, and a porch

under which they could finally get a bit of shelter from the rain, but before they even dared to knock, the loud voices coming

from the inside had them all crouch down and hide.

“You’re acting like bandits!” shouted a loud voice. “Who do you think you are, to barge in and claim to check the

houses? What does that mean?! You Yekara think you can do whatever you want! This is not an order from the King, and even if it was, this is my house and you will not be taking one step inside!”

“Move aside, or we will force our way in! The man you call King committed treason and tried to run away instead of stepping down and negotiating with the rightful heir!”

“Rightful heir, my ass! I’d rather eat all the rotten meat in the Kingdom than believe what comes out of your mouths! I

will only obey the one King I acknowledge, the White King! As if I would trust a Yekara!”

“This is your last warning!”

“Fine!” a female voice shouted. “Search if you want, we’ve got nothing to hide! But you’d better not steal a thing, and I swear you will get payback for this, you dogs!”

Next to them, Naptunie looked on the verge of crying, with her little fists clenched.

Tessandra put an arm around her

shoulders and exchanged a glance with the siblings. Naptunie’s family was a no-go.

They felt sorry for them, and they could

hear the ruckus inside from the Yekara searching all over the place for them. Some of

Naptunie’s younger siblings or cousins

were crying, probably afraid.

Quickly, they walked away from the house’s rear porch, and went back out in the rain, to hide between the boats.

“I can’t believe this!” cried Nana. “Those... savages! I hope they eat rotten meat and die!”

“I’m sorry, Nana,” muttered Tessandra, “but now we know we can’t hide in the Capital.

They’ll search all the clans we

were allied with first, and I don’t think they will stop until they get what they want...”

“The outskirts,” said Cessilia. “We c-can try to go th-there, and it will b-be safer to

reunite with K-Krai too. But we

have t-to be quick...”

She was worried for Ashen. Darsan was big and doing his best not to move him, and they had covered him with the fur

coat, but his situation was already critical, and now they couldn’t even find a safe and dry place to lay him. They all quickly

got back on Kian’s back, already drenched, and Kassian tapped his dragon’s back.

“Wanna go find Daddy?”

The dragon emitted a little, high-pitched growl, suddenly speeding up against the stream. Soon enough, the bridge

appeared far above them, seeming rather calm. When Kian used his wings to jump up and climb once on the pile, and then jump

again to land on top of the bridge, Cessilia immediately realized why: the Yekara had closed the gates.

Luckily, they had probably focused their forces inside the Inner Capital, and focused on no one entering, because there

was no one to stop them when Kassian easily opened the heavy doors into the Outer Capital. As soon as they stepped foot

there, Krai's large head appeared, and Kian jumped on the Black Dragon to play.

"Hey there!" smiled Darsan.

Krai answered him with an angry growl, suddenly turning its red eyes on him. Darsan jumped and immediately stepped back, cautious.

"If I were to bet," Tessandra whispered to him. "I think Uncle is still upset with you..."

"Not funny, Tessa."

She chuckled, but they quickly walked past the pair of dragons to follow Cessilia and Naptunie in the streets. There

were still refugees from earlier, who raised their heads, curious to see them again, with the King lying on Darsan's back.

Thanks to that, though, the word quickly traveled to their allies still there. Bastat was the first to appear at one of the doors and quickly invited them inside.

"What's going on? Is that... His Majesty?"

"A lot of bad stuff," groaned Tessandra.

The brothers quickly cleared a table to lay Ashen down, and his state was immediately revealed to Bastat, so shocked she put a hand to cover her mouth.

"Are the d-doctors of the Hashat T-Tribe still here?" asked Cessilia.

"I-I believe they went back when they announced the doors were going to be closed..."

Lady Ishira thought something

odd was happening, so she went to check. But they did leave plenty of medicine behind."

"G-good. I will need it..."

"I'll send someone to fetch it right away," nodded Bastat, immediately gesturing to one of the servants present, "but... by the gods, what happened?"

"Actually, you can tell us that while we heal him," added Kassian, walking to the other side of the table Ashen was

lying on. "I think I have a lot to catch up on."

However, Nana suddenly stood up, still looking upset.

"I... I think I should go and warn my uncle."

She left without adding a word, and a heavy silence followed her departure. It was as if now that they had finally found

a place to stop, all the tension was getting even heavier. Seeing even the usually cheerful Nana so upset was depressing too.

Tessandra sighed, and sat down in one corner of the room, exhausted. Darsan decided to stand by the door, glancing through the window from time to time with his arms crossed.

Lady Bastat's servant quickly came back, arms full of medicine and as many medical tools as they could find. Once the

water was hot and both she and Kassian had washed their hands, with her brother's help, she immediately began providing the

best help she could to Ashen. His state was terrible, but while his chances of survival were low, they weren't nil, and she had

to focus on that. Cessilia began to explain the whole situation to both her brothers and Bastat, everyone else listening in complete silence. She spoke with a monotone voice, not raising her eyes once, as if speaking helped her remain focused and calm. For a long while, only her voice filled the room, with the rain quietly pouring in the background. Naptunie didn't return, but a younger cousin of hers did come to deliver some food for everyone, and say she had fallen asleep at her uncle's.

When Cessilia was done explaining, they were still doing their best to save Ashen. She had her arms soiled with his blood up to her elbows, but she was confident he'd make it. It was already impressive that he was still alive and breathing, and she was prouder than ever of him.

"Those wretched Yekaras..." groaned Bastat. "They will definitely pay for this. I won't recognize a king that is no better than the tyrant."

"...I'm so s-sorry about your f-father, Lady Bastat."

"Do not be." She shook her head. "He met an honorable end... Our tribe believes death is the opening of a new life, in which our actions in the previous will help the gods decide our next destiny. I will mourn him later, but first, I need to be sure his spirit can be avenged. This fake king will not be recognized by my tribe."

"I doubt they will be going by the popular vote," scoffed Tessandra. "They wanted to end him and use force against all the other tribes to comply. The Pangoja probably already fell, and they corrupted enough Royal Guards too..."

Her voice broke with those last words. Cessilia felt sorry for her cousin. Even if they kept hoping Sabael had survived the fight in the cave, not knowing about his whereabouts was too hard...

"They won't be able to take the city if all the tribes resist," insisted Bastat, "and I know most will. No one is foolish enough to believe in a king supported by the Yekara Clan, of all people."

"B-but what can we do?" muttered Cessilia. "Ashen's heavily injured, and we c-can't keep him hidden here for long.

Once they r-realize he's not in the Inner C-Capital, they will c-come for him here..."

"...Unless someone can offer you all a safe place."

They turned their heads to see who had spoken.

That person had arrived from the door behind Bastat, completely silent. Everyone became on edge, Tessandra even

putting a hand on her sword, but before she could draw it, the stranger started to remove their hood. Cessilia immediately recognized the woman. It was the one who had stared at her while she helped with the flood earlier, with the peculiar dot and lines tattooed on her face.

"Greetings, Princess," she said with a polite smile.

"You..." muttered Bastat, staring at her tattoos. "You're... from the Cheshi Clan!"

The woman nodded, as she slowly removed the rest of her hood, revealing tattoos that went all the way around her completely shaved head.

"My name is Aglithia. I am the third daughter of the Cheshi Clan Leader."

Cessilia and Tessandra immediately exchanged a shocked look. The Cheshi Clan had been surprisingly quiet, if not invisible, ever since they had arrived in this Kingdom. From what Yassim had told them, they were considered the wisest clan, but they had also completely removed themselves from the political circle ever since Ashen had suddenly gotten rid of the violent Kunu Tribe, which gave mixed signals about their intentions.

"...What d-do you want?" asked Cessilia, a bit doubtful. "This is our first t-time interacting with one of your p-people. I d-don't understand why you would help us n-now."

"Well, it seems to me like you need it, for starters. Plus, just because we haven't been interacting with you or His

Majesty doesn't mean we haven't been watching. In fact, we have been watching for a while now, and the arrival of your party did seem to stir a few interesting changes in the Kingdom."

"You mean like the Yekara taking over the whole city while your King is bleeding to death?" scoffed Tessandra. "Yeah, sounds like a ton of fun for you guys to show up now?"

"We suspected what the Yekara had planned," nodded Aglithia. "We only chose to get involved at the right moment, and when we knew there would be a side we could fully support."

"...You watched my sister because of her relationship with the King," said Kassian. The woman nodded.

"Exactly. Not only with His Majesty but with the Family Leaders, as well," she explained, glancing at Bastat. "Until recently, my clan had major doubts in King Ashen's abilities as a leader. His relationships with the tribes weren't good, and he had distanced himself from the people. Much to our surprise, Princess Cessilia's arrival changed a lot of things and had us reconsider our position."

"Great," retorted Tessandra. "So if things went sour, you were just going to hide and watch this Kingdom fall into the hands of brutes?"

"...It wouldn't have been the first time."

Cessilia realized all the current tribes and clans were those who had survived Ashen's father's tyranny. Either by making themselves small, or making and breaking alliances at the right time. Some like the Dorosef, who were essential to the survival of the people, couldn't just disappear so easily, but scholars like the Cheshi were rumored to be, would have been the ones most at risk. For their clan to have survived until now, unthreatened and unbothered, was truly surprising.



The woman named Aglithia took a couple of steps forward, her eyes on the King lying on the table. Kassian reacted to her approach, a hand on his sword, but everybody remained silent. This woman didn't look like a scholar. There was an aura around her, something that fighters could recognize. They could only see her face and neck, but they could guess her strong shoulders and fit body under her cloak. She turned her eyes to Cessilia again. "My clan is older than this Kingdom itself, and we have rarely involved ourselves in politics unless the situation called for it. Which king rules is not our concern, unless it causes issues for the people. Hence, we spoke against the tyrant and allowed his son to take over. Now, we aren't fond of the Yekara Clan and their ambitions, but we were going to wait and see if King Ashen turned out to be a better ruler than what we had observed so far. That is, until the Princess appeared by his side. As I said, we have been watching you since you arrived." "Spying, you mean," groaned Tessandra. "Yes. Among other things." Aglithia glanced over her shoulder and, to their surprise, none other than Nupia stepped forward, bowing. "You little—!" "The triplets are at my family's service. We had put them inside the castle to work for His Majesty and evaluate him, but when you arrived, we changed our plans and made sure they would watch you instead, Princess. As it turns out, you are a fine heiress to the long line of Dragon Masters." This time, Cessilia exchanged a glance with Kassian. The way that woman said that was as if she knew as much about their dragons and their family as they did... "...What do you know about our family?" asked Kassian. "About the dragon owners? Or Dragon... Masters?" "I know a lot! I know more about your ancestors, though. The first Dragon Masters... Oh, don't be so surprised. I told you my clan was old, very old. We were around even before this continent was split into two nations." Once again, Tessandra and the siblings were baffled. Even Bastat looked completely at a loss. There was a time the Dragon Empire and the Eastern Kingdom were united as one? They had never heard of such a thing, at least, not as a historical fact. There were a few legends they had heard, bits here and there, and what one could imagine from the past, but neither country had been very diligent in keeping records. Even the Dragon Empire's centuries-old palace had limited archives and no mention of such a thing. Facing them, the Cheshi woman smiled again, nodding briefly.

"I suppose you'd be surprised to hear such a thing. However, I cannot tell you too much. There are secrets I cannot reveal that belong to my family only. At least, not yet. I did come here to extend an invitation, though. On my clan's behalf. The Cheshi Clan wants to meet the Dragon Princess, and perhaps, establish an alliance. We don't have much of a military force, but we do have a few secrets that might be of help to you if you decide to go against the Yekara Clan."

"If...?" repeated Cessilia.

"Well, you could also decide to leave and go back to the Empire."

"I won't b-be abandoning Ashen!"

"I didn't expect that either. After all, you could both very well leave this Kingdom to the Yekara Clan. It is really up to you, to fight this war or not."

Cessilia hesitated. She had even forgotten about such a possibility. She had only been here for several days, yet she hadn't even considered going back to the Empire at all... She surprised herself. Most likely, it was because of Ashen. Cessilia knew she was free to come and go, but Ashen had responsibilities as King. Plus, she knew his character enough to guess he'd hate to have to flee to her country, especially if it was because of someone taking his position and ruling over his people. He would never concede victory to that adopted brother of his, let alone the Yekara. She had seen how he truly valued this place and its inhabitants.

She slowly shook her head.

"We are n-not leaving," she declared.

"Glad to hear that!" smiled Aglithia. "Then, the invitation stands. You're welcome to come and meet our Clan Leader tomorrow at dawn."

"How?" frowned Tessandra. "The whole city will be blocked by the Yekara!"

"Don't worry. I will come and get you."

Well, that didn't answer the question at all. Aglithia gave them a quick nod, and before anyone could inquire any

further, she turned around to leave, Nupia following after her.

The room remained silent for a few seconds after she had left, everyone slowly soaking the information in.

"...I can't believe even the Cheshi are going to get involved," Bastat finally said. "It has been weeks since I even saw one of their people! They stay so holed up in that fortress of theirs, no one would notice if they really remained quiet all along... What are you going to do, Lady Cessilia?"

"Would you t-trust them?"

"Honestly? Yes. The Cheshi are exceptionally wise. It isn't just a rumor. They have intervened many times before, to

help with natural disasters or solve trade issues. They even created the current money we use, and their ancestors came up with half the city's architectural plans. Some say all kings validated by the Cheshi are meant to rule until their death. They were also the first ones to doubt King Ashtoran's rule, and many say there would have been a lot more deaths if the Cheshi hadn't intervened to prove some people's innocence or invalidate the crimes they were arrested for. They even spent a lot of money to free some people who were imprisoned for not paying their taxes."

"...Sounds like good folk to me," shrugged Darsan.

"We'll see about that in the morning," declared Kassian.

Cessilia nodded, her eyes going back to Ashen. She and her brother had done all they could. The table was covered in

blood and had turned into a surgery ward for a short while, but at least, they had stopped the bleeding and managed to reduce

his fever. Although they had stitched him up back and front, now it would all be up to Ashen to survive the night. She was tired,

but she didn't think she'd be able to sleep a wink until she was absolutely sure he was fine, awake, and out of danger.

"Do you know if there are more of those beignet things, wherever they came from?" asked Darsan. "Those were really

good, and I'm starving, we literally skipped dinner to fly here."

"I can send someone to ask," nodded Bastat with a smile. "You can all stay here comfortably. I have two rooms ready

for you upstairs if you need them, and plenty of blankets as well."

"We probably shouldn't move while the Yekara search the city for us," groaned Tessandra.

"...I'm worried about the p-people in the Inner Capital," muttered Cessilia.

"Don't worry." Bastat smiled at her. "The Eastern Kingdom people are more resilient than you think. No one wants

another tyrant to rule again. We can fight back in small ways, even for the most unarmed of us. Just focus on His Majesty and

yourself for now. ...For tonight, at least."

"What, just grilling them is a no-go then?"

"We can't fry the whole damn city, Darsan!" Tessandra rolled her eyes.

"Then what the heck do we have dragons for?!"

"Oh, shut it," groaned Tessa, getting up. "Come on, let's just get your beignets. I want to check if we can get some

information from outside too..."

"Alright. Oh, by the way, can you introduce me to that sexy gal from earlier?"

"No fucking way! You stay out of that red-haired vixen's way!"

"Red-haired? No, the other one!"

"...Wait, you mean Nana?"

They kept arguing while leaving the room, and Bastat left after them.

Now that she was alone with Kassian, Cessilia sighed and stepped away from the table to wash her hands. Her brother

did the same next to her. For a while, neither of them said anything as they went to sit on the little bench Tessandra and Darsan were on earlier, opposite Ashen. They naturally sat very close to each other, and Cessilia let her head rest on her brother's shoulder. Kassian smiled and put an arm around her shoulders.

"So... You've been busy, huh?"

"Yeah... This K-Kingdom really has a lot going on."

"You know, for someone whose lover was almost killed and had to flee after a fight, you seem happy."

Cessilia suddenly lifted her head off his shoulder, staring at her brother with a shocked expression.

"Happy?" she repeated.

Kassian nodded.

"Yeah. I was surprised. I don't think I've seen you like this in a while. Not since Cece left your side... Do you even hear yourself? You barely stutter anymore, Cessi. The last time we saw each other, you barely spoke at all, and never so clearly either. The only way to hear your voice was for you to read something... Now, not only do you barely stutter, but you

speak a lot to others. It sounds like you made a good handful of friends and allies too."

Cessilia was shocked. Was that really the conclusion her brother had come to, in such a short time? She tried to replay

that evening in her head. She had indeed... changed. Before, she wouldn't have gotten involved in any fight. She wouldn't have

confidently spoken to someone like she did to Jisel and Bastat. She was always one of the shyest among her siblings, and

losing Cece had made that worse. She took a deep breath.

"There has b-been some good... and b-bad things."

"Like what?"

"I f-fought someone today."

"...One-on-one?"

Cessilia nodded.

"I lost c-control again. I almost... k-killed her."

"But you stopped."

"No... Ashen was the one who s-stopped me. ...I p-panicked. I'm still so s-scared to fight and k-kill someone I didn't mean t-to..."

"Cessi... With what I've heard and seen, it was probably a real enemy, not a training partner."

"B-but what if it's really not someone I want t-to kill, next time? K-Kassian, I can't fight until I c-can trust myself again."

"You don't trust yourself because you think you need Cece. It's not true. Dragons are a reflection of our inner selves.

Losing Cece might have been hard, but it doesn't mean you're as broken inside as you think you are, Cessi.

“B-but Uncle said people without their d-dragons go mad...”

Kassian sighed, shaking his head.

“Uncle Opheus said that years ago, and he probably didn’t mean they became crazy. More like they went mad from...

sadness, I think. Even Grandma told you that was wrong. Just... ignore what he said, Cessi. You’re not going to go crazy. Plus, you heard what Mom said, there’s a chance she’ll come back... so think about it this way, if that helps you.”

Cessilia frowned and lowered her head.

“You know... S-sometimes, I’m...”

“What?”

“No... It’s n-nothing.”

Kassian waited, hoping she’d change her mind and open herself up, but it didn’t happen. He sighed and pulled her to

rest on his shoulder again. When she refused to speak, his sister was harder to open

than a dragon’s maw. Kassian was the

closest to her among their siblings, yet he knew nothing but time would be able to have Cessilia speak. He looked forward

again, at Ashen lying on the table.

After hearing from Nebora that their parents had let Cessilia come here, he had been completely stunned, and even mad

at them. They all knew how unstable the situation was in the neighboring Kingdom.

Even if they had sent her with a dragon, he

was surprised they had agreed to this at all. Yet, their father had said Cessilia needed this. That sentence had been an enigma

until now. He had thought all along that her heart had been closed by Cece’s loss, the key dropped in the Imperial Palace’s

lake, but perhaps, he had been wrong. Perhaps it could actually be healed here... with one man’s help. For him as an older

brother, it was a bit frustrating, but he was glad he had come to support her.

“It will be alright,” he said, patting her head.

“Yep. The cavalry has arrived!” exclaimed Darsan with a huge smile, his arms full of beignets.

“We got you some,” sighed Tessandra, handing them a plate each, “and some

information too. The Yekara have seized

control of the Inner Capital, and not calmly either. A lot of people are getting arrested for protesting. They are talking about

making some public executions in the morning...”

“They want t-to execute them?” exclaimed Cessilia. “All of th-those people?”

“Those who protested, at least. I think they want to make an example of them, to dissuade people from resisting.”

“That’s what I’d do too,” nodded Darsan, his mouth full. “Intimidation strategy is rather efficient among military tactics.

Especially if there are no fighters to resist. People don’t like having their... Oh. ...Sorry.”

After getting glares from three pairs of eyes, he grimaced and went to sit in a corner with a sorry expression.

Meanwhile, Kassian shook his head and turned back to Tessandra.  
“If I understand right, we don’t really have any other... fighters we can rely on?”  
“Not necessarily. The Pangoja Clan was the only other one with an official position as fighters, if they survived... There are the non-corrupt Royal Guards too, and probably a few mercenaries here and there.”  
“...Th-there were a lot of m-mercenaries outside of the C-Capital,” said Cessilia.  
“Yeah. Bad people, Cessi, remember?”  
“Not n-necessarily. They d-didn’t become mercenaries by choice...”  
“They are still probably not fond of the King who kicked their butts out of his Capital, Cessilia. I wouldn’t count on them too much.”  
However, Cessilia was still frowning, thinking deeply about this. Kassian smirked.  
“There’s that Cheshi Clan we need to check out too. Am I the only one who noticed they probably don’t just handle books?”  
“We noticed too. That girl she revealed as a spy? She’s a sister among triplets, and all three of them are trained fighters, at the very least. I would say... assassins.”  
“...That makes sense,” nodded Kassian, “and explains how their clan really survived so long... No one really makes it through centuries in an unstable nation with just books.”  
They all remained silent for a long time, then, a faint smile appeared on Tessandra’s lips.  
“...It seems like the Yekara haven’t won yet, after all.”  
“So, do we get to kick ass or not?” Darsan asked, his mouth half full.  
“Probably,” said Kassian with a smile. “For now, though, we should get some sleep. Especially you two. Let’s make sure you treat your injuries before sleeping, I don’t want you to catch a fever overnight.”  
“You sure are your mom’s son,” chuckled Tessandra. “Don’t worry, Mommy, we can take care of ourselves. Damn, we survived just over a week before you had to come and save our asses... Come on, Cessi, let’s go upstairs. I really need some sleep.”  
However, as she stood up, Cessilia’s eyes were still on Ashen. Kassian came behind her and gently pushed her to go with Tessandra.  
“Go sleep, Cessi. Darsan and I will watch him.”  
“We will?” asked his brother, raising an eyebrow. “I’m still not fond of the guy, for the record!”  
“If you do anything to him, you’re dead, Darsan,” groaned Tessandra, pulling Cessilia’s hand to leave the room.  
“Fine... Hey, so you’re introducing me to Nana tomorrow, right? Right?! Hey!”  
“It’s Naptunie to you! Don’t you dare think you’ll get a love life before I get my boyfriend back!”

## Chapter 22

Despite how worried they both were for their partners, Cessilia and Tessandra fell asleep almost as soon as their bodies hit the bed. The day had been absolutely exhausting for both of them and although their minds couldn't quiet down, they needed the rest. Lady Bastat had prepared a room with a comfortable bed for them too, so despite the noise outside and their injuries, they managed to sleep through the night.

When Cessilia woke up and opened her eyes, the sound and smell of the rain came to her first. The room was still dark, but from the noises outside, she could tell the day was slowly starting. She sat up, worried she would miss the time the Cheshi had given her and glanced around. Tessandra was still sound asleep on her side of the bed, but someone had brought fresh clothes for the two of them and put them on the little table against the wall. There was also everything necessary for a quick body wash, with a basin of water, soap, and towels. Cessilia sighed and got up to quickly clean herself. She checked her injuries, but most damage was internal. She could tell her muscles were sore from the brutal sword fighting and swimming. She was a bit mad at herself. If she had kept training regularly, at the very least, she might have been in better shape than this...

She quickly got ready, glad to be able to refresh herself a little and get into some clean clothes. The simple but thicker dark brown dress Bastat had found for her was both comfortable yet pretty, off-the-shoulder with a flowy skirt. It was definitely a good fit and a nice change. She had gone straight to sleep in her dirty clothes from the previous day... whatever was left of them. At least Tessandra had undressed and slept pretty much naked. Cessilia decided to let her cousin catch a few extra minutes of sleep and went downstairs, dying to check on Ashen's state. As soon as she thought about how she had left him the previous day, she couldn't help but be worried. She knew Kassian wouldn't have let anything happen to him and wouldn't have left his side if he promised to look after him, but she just had to check for herself.

"...When did you arrive?" a voice groaned.

She stopped, a couple of steps away from the door, recognizing Ashen's voice and a chuckle from Kassian.

"Last night. Just in time to save our younger sister, who was also trying to save you."

"...I see."

"You're welcome, by the way," grunted Darsan.

"I don't remember inviting you here."

"We invited ourselves," retorted Kassian. "From what I understand, Cessilia and Tessandra weren't here by your invitation, either. Yet, they still got into a life-threatening situation because of you. Again."

Ashen went silent, probably pissed. Cessilia sighed. She hadn't expected the relationship between her brothers and him to suddenly be all good, but... there was a time when they did get along. She had hoped this would help a bit. Right now, though, they only sounded pissed at each other.

"Where is Cessilia?" Ashen asked, suddenly sounding nervous.

"Upstairs. She deserved some rest after everything she went through because of you."

"I did not ask her to come here, I did not ask her to get in the middle of our political affairs, and I did not ask her to put herself in danger because of me! She chose to stay and she chose to stay by my side. If you're not happy with that—"

"There you go again. Blaming everyone who's putting their lives on the line for you."  
"You—!"

"K-Kassian," said Cessilia, stepping forward. "Stop it, p-please."

Her brother was leaning against the window, arms crossed and looking just like she had left him the night before. Ashen had managed to sit up on the table, holding his waist injury with his hand, while Darsan was seated on the other side of the room, in a chair, busy drinking from a large mug.

"...Cessi," muttered Kassian. "How are you feeling?"

"B-better," she said, her eyes on Ashen.

She walked up to him, checking on his state. Ashen immediately grabbed her hand, looking her up and down too, his expression getting darker for each scratch he spotted on her body.

"...I'm sorry," he muttered.

"I'm f-fine. How about you? D-does it hurt a lot?"

"I'm fine." He shook his head.

"Hey, hey, hey!" exclaimed Darsan. "Why are you holding hands? Stop holding hands with my sister!"

"Beat it, Darsan, she's a grown-up," yawned Tessandra, stepping into the room.

She had also changed outfits, although her hair was an utter mess.

"I don't care if she's a grown-up, she's my little sister! That guy can't touch her like that. I said let go!"

Tessandra rolled her eyes and walked over to grab a piece of fruit from the little plate that had been left there, most likely for them. From the smell and greasy stains, there also used to be beignets, but Darsan had obviously only left crumbs behind him.

"How l-late is it?" Cessilia asked, a bit worried.

Now that she was downstairs, she could tell the darkness outside was mostly caused by the terrible weather, the sky very dark once again. The rain was much lighter, though, just quiet drops hitting the cobblestones in a pretty melody.

"Not that late," said Darsan. "Sunrise just began, it was still completely dark only minutes ago. I was about to come upstairs to get you but he woke up first."



His green eyes exchanged a glare with Ashen, and Cessilia sighed.

"He watched over you all n-night," she said to him, a bit annoyed.

"...Sorry," muttered Ashen, looking away first.

Despite that, a heavy silence came over the room. Neither Ashen nor Cessilia's brother were happy about the other's

presence, and for a while, Tessandra eating her apple was the only sound in the room.

Cessilia insisted on checking Ashen's

injury quickly before they planned to leave, but that was done in complete silence too.

"Good morning!"

Nana's voice arrived like a bright ray of sunshine in the room.

Immediately, Darsan jumped to his feet and threw his mug into the fireplace, the alcohol provoking an impressive

reaction from the fire. The arm of the leather chair nearby caught on fire, and Darsan

leapt to extinguish it with his hand,

nervously patting the leather until the flames disappeared under his scaled hand. Then,

he straightened himself, acting as if

nothing had happened, and put on a large smile.

"H-hi, Nana!"

"...And here I thought I had embarrassed myself with Sab," muttered Tessandra.

"Ah, good morning," answered Nana, blushing a bit. "I-I brought you guys more beignets before we go! Oh, and some

uh... good news? I don't know if it's that good, but... Sabael is alive."

"Really?" exclaimed Tessandra, almost dropping her apple. "Are you sure, Nana?"

Naptunie nodded, putting down the tray full of freshly baked beignets. Immediately, the smell was more appealing than

anything, and everyone moved to grab one, Cessilia handing one to Ashen who

remained seated. She realized as soon as the

warm filling and delicious fish hit her palate that she hadn't eaten in way too long and

was hungry. Naptunie's beignets were

like heaven to everyone right now.

"Y-yes", said Nana, fidgeting with her fingers. "Some of our fishermen and merchants were allowed by the Yekara to

go outside today. They were heavily inspected, so I guess they are still searching for...

you, Your Majesty. But my cousin that

was with them said some people definitely saw Sabael and my uncle being kept as prisoners. They have them exposed in

public places, and they said they are going to, uh... execute them."

"Do they know when?" asked Tessandra, grabbing a second beignet.

"No... Our family members and others tried to ask, but the Yekara people furiously refused to answer, and threatened to

capture more people and hang them. But they said all the prisoners are heavily

guarded... Do you think they will really kill

them?"

"No," said Kassian, "it sounds more like they are trying to use them as bait to get you guys to appear."

"My cousin said the Yekara searched the Inner Capital the whole night!" added Nana. "It was a terrible ruckus. They barged into almost every house and even inspected our fishing boats. The citizens are very unhappy. A lot of people have been protesting too. My cousin said my uncles all refused to sell fish to any Yekara this morning!"

"The whole Capital will be rebelling," said Tessandra. "None of the clans like the Yekara, and those who are allied with Cessi will sense something's off about them suddenly taking control. It's too bad they can't fight and only resist like this..."

She sighed and combed her hair back. She was probably glad to hear Sabael was alive, but likely twice as worried about his fate. Even if he had survived, he was likely not in a good state after fighting, and now, he could be killed any minute by the Yekara. They had surely noted he was close to the two cousins... Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a glance. The King looked sullen, his fingers almost carving his anger into the table's edge he was holding on to.

"It's much better than nothing," said Kassian. "Any form of the people not agreeing to their terms will buy us time, and wear them out mentally."

"...We n-need to speak t-to the Cheshi," declared Cessilia. "I want t-to know how they c-can help us."

"I'm curious too," nodded her brother. "The way they spoke about our family and dragons... sounds like there's more to it."

Next to Cessilia, Ashen was about to get on his feet, but she gently pushed him.

"I'm not staying back," he groaned.

"You n-need to rest, Ashen. I d-don't want your wound to reopen. You b-barely survived it once. I d-don't think you ccan endure more b-blood loss."

"You had a fever for half of the night too," added Kassian.

"I'm not letting you go without me," he groaned.

"I'm g-going with my b-brother," she said. "S-stay here with Tessa, p-please."

"No. Wherever you're going, I'm going too. I'll be fine. I can endure a walk. Plus, you're going back inside the Inner

Capital. I need to go back too, I can't stay hidden here while my people—"

"You almost d-died!" Cessilia protested, angry. "You might p-pass out just from s-standing up! Stop p-protesting and stay here! I will have you ch-chained to this t-table if I have to!"

"I'll gladly help," chuckled Darsan behind her.

Ashen grimaced, but Cessilia was serious, and no one in the room had ever seen her so furious. She even had tears of frustration in her eyes. With a sigh, Kassian stepped forward, putting a hand on his younger sister's shoulder.

“Don’t worry, I will stay back with Tessa, and watch over him.”

“I don’t need you,” sighed Ashen.

“No, but I need to speak to you,” said Kassian. “There are a few things it is high time you know, and I have a few questions for you as well.”

Both Ashen and Cessilia exchanged a surprised look. What could there possibly be that Ashen missed that Kassian had to tell him? After what had happened the last time they saw each other... Cessilia glanced back at her other brother, but Darsan also had a serious expression on, his lips pinched as if he had something unpleasant on his mind.

“...K-Kassian?”

“It’s not something you need to hear, Cessi. ...You should get going.”

“I’m coming too!” exclaimed Naptunie. “I’m curious about the Cheshi Clan... It’s probably fine if I come along, right...?”

Don’t worry, I’m coming too!” added Darsan with a bright smile, completely misunderstanding her question. “Nothing to fear!”

Tessandra rolled her eyes.

“Fine... I’ll make sure those two don’t kill each other while you’re gone, Cessi. You should probably get going soon.”

“...I did not agree to this,” groaned Ashen. “No offense, Kassian, but I don’t think there’s anything to add to what

happened back then. You and your father were pretty clear when you banished me.”

“Ashen...” muttered Cessilia, squeezing his hand.

However, right now, he was still furious at her brother. Cessilia couldn’t help but feel a bit choked up. To Ashen,

Kassian was tightly linked to his memory of leaving the Dragon Empire, and the hell that had come after. Even if he had heard

Cessilia’s side of the story, there was probably nothing that would relieve how he felt toward her father, who had deliberately

sent him away. Yet, Kassian’s expression wasn’t that of someone who felt regret or even guilt, which made the tension between them even worse.

“No,” he said. “Father should have told him the truth back then, and he allowed me to tell him now.”

“K-Kassian, what are you t-talking about? What t-truth...?”

“...I’m slightly curious to hear too,” muttered Tessandra.

She glanced to the side, but Darsan had gone back to that sour expression. Kassian looked at his sister, but it was clear

she wouldn’t leave before she heard this too. He sighed, uncrossing his arms.

“...Father didn’t want to send you away, Ashen. He only realized he had no choice.”

“Why?”

“When you came to the Onyx Castle, we would regularly find foreigners trying to cross our borders. They were coming

for you, assassins paid to cut off your head and bring it back to the Eastern Kingdom.”  
“...What?”

This time, all traces of anger were gone from Ashen’s face. He was simply shocked, and so was Cessilia. She exchanged a look with her cousin, but Tessandra was dumbfounded as well. Only Darsan knew the truth too.

“It wasn’t that big of a problem,” he scoffed. “Most of them were weak, and we got rid of them before they got close.”

“We were shocked by how it never stopped, though,” continued Kassian. “Father had already captured and interrogated some to find out what they wanted, so we knew they were after you and who had sent them. But they were still getting closer and closer to our family. Some of our siblings were still very young at the time, the youngest wasn’t even a year old. We even found spies lurking around, probably trying to find out why you weren’t dead yet, to bring the information back to your father.”

Ashen’s expression was slowly sinking. Even Cessilia was in shock. She had no idea about any of this. Darsan was only a year older than she was, and Kassian was the same age as Ashen. That meant her older brothers had been protecting the two of them for years without them even having the slightest idea...

“Our aunt reinforced the defenses at the border, and we sent some of our younger siblings to stay with our grandmother too, but we could never be at ease. We always had to keep an eye out. That night... when Father found out you and Cessilia had snuck out of the Onyx Castle, he became furious.”

“Wait... you mean he wasn’t furious because I was with Cessilia, but because...”

“You and our sister had put yourselves in danger,” nodded Kassian. “We... Father, Darsan, and I had argued about it, but he was too angry and decided to tell you to leave. He knew you’d be strong enough to survive after your training, and just like me and Darsan, you’d have no difficulty fighting those people off. But he couldn’t endure Cessilia, Mother, or one of our siblings being in danger any longer.”

“He kicked your butt right out because it was simpler,” added Darsan, “and he figured a certain someone would follow you too...”

His eyes went to Cessilia, who was slowly realizing the truth. The memory she had tried to bury deep inside all this time was re-emerging. The men who had captured her and tortured her and Cece had said some things about a prince they had to kill... For the longest time, she hadn’t thought much about it. At that time, she had no idea about Ashen’s background, and she was part of the Imperial Family. She had thought they were talking about one of her brothers or her father. She had never thought...

"Wait..." muttered Ashen, livid.

His dark eyes kept going to Cessilia, to the large scar on her throat. He was also slowly starting to understand the truth

about that night. Kassian and Darsan exchanged a glance, the latter crossing his arms with a pissed-off expression.

"Yep," he grunted. "Our little sister did exactly what we had feared she'd do..."

"We found out too late that she wasn't in her room," muttered Kassian. "We went after her as fast as we could, but... I

take it that you heard the rest of it already."

His eyes went to Cessilia, who was still in shock.

"Th-the men who attacked me and C-Cece were... after Ashen?" she muttered.

"Yeah," said Darsan. "Seems like they were fine using a girl and her dragon as the side prize."

A long, heavy silence ensued. No one dared to say a word, all a bit shaken up or affected by their story. Cessilia and

Ashen's hands had parted. She had tears of anger in her eyes. She had no idea how long those people had been targeting Ashen.

How could they repeatedly send someone to kill a teenage boy?! Meanwhile, Ashen was as still as a stone, his eyes on the floor, completely stunned.

"...That's so sad," muttered Nana, breaking the silence, tears in her eyes.

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it anymore," said Tessandra. "...You guys should really get going now. I'm sorry

about what happened to you two, but right now, my man is still waiting in the middle of the city to be killed or saved. So, let's

get going and see what the Cheshi have to offer, or we'll have a lot more fucking tragic love stories."

They closed the door of Bastat's safe house behind them, dark expressions in their eyes. While Naptunie walked ahead,

a bit excited to see the Cheshi, Cessilia was much slower behind her, still dismayed by the revelations Kassian had just

divulged. They had parted without a word, and Ashen had remained mute, in complete shock, not even giving her a glance...

"Don't worry," suddenly said her older brother's voice.

She lifted her eyes to see Darsan smiling at her. He put his big fur cloak on her shoulders, and his large hands after that,

patting her gently.

"Kassian isn't as mad as he makes it look, and your Ashen's not that much of an idiot," he continued. "He just needs a

bit of... toughening up! Do you remember? They used to be super close too. Just leave it to Kassian, alright? He'll get Ashen

back on track. Don't worry, little sis. We're here for you!"

Darsan's warm and comforting words finally made her smile. Cessilia nodded and walked into his embrace, happy to

have her older brother there. Because Darsan was so big, she felt like he could wrap all of her in his arms, and it was the most

comforting space. She heard him chuckle.

"I missed you too! Hey, next time, take me along, alright? I know Dad and Kassian aren't all that fun, but you should

have at least told me! Escaping to see a boy... Ugh, I don't want to think about you getting a boyfriend! You're too young!"

"If I'm t-too young, you're also t-too young to date Nana..."

"Hey, I'm eleven months older than you. That's still—!"

"Oh, Sir Dragon!" Naptunie exclaimed, who hadn't heard any of that. "Good morning! Oh, sorry, I don't have any

beignets for you today... Oh, and Sir Shiny Dragon! Good morning to you too!"

Both Krai and Kian had appeared at the same time, their heads appearing at the end street with their eyes shining in

excitement. When those two were next to each other, it was easier to see their differences. Kian's body was indeed longer,

more snake-like, while Krai was bigger, like a bull. Kian's wings were also thinner and longer, almost like fins, while Krai's were larger and seemed stronger.

"You should see my dragon!" Darsan said. "Dran's even bigger than these two!"

"Oh, really? ...He couldn't come with you?" asked Naptunie, a bit disappointed.

Her question made Darsan grimace, visibly embarrassed.

"Ah... uh, not really. We both made a bit of a mess back home, so we were grounded. Dran's with my dad, he tends to be a pain when he's let loose, so..."

"He's t-too much like you," said Cessilia, walking up to the dragons to pet them.

"Hey, I'm a free spirit! It can't be helped that things are so weak next to me! You see these muscles, Nana? I train six

hours a day to get this strong! ...You like strong men, right?"

Naptunie nodded, a bit shy, but Darsan kept showing off his biceps proudly, and she was happily being the audience.

Cessilia chuckled.

"He b-broke columns of the Imperial P-Palace when we were young," she told Naptunie.

"Our aunt even b-banished

Dran t-twice because he made a mess d-during the festival too..."

"What, really?!"

"Cessi!" groaned Darsan. "You're supposed to help me..."

They joked for a while, but Naptunie was more impressed by Darsan's antics than scared. They played around with the

dragons for a while too, both of them attracted to Cessilia's pets and the delicious smells on Naptunie. The rain was now a

calm drizzle that ran down their scales, but neither seemed bothered by it.

"Good morning."

They turned around, spotting Aglithia standing there with a faint smile. She was wearing the same outfit as yesterday,

and was busy eating one of the familiar beignets.

"Ah!" Nana exclaimed.

"I can't help but get one when I can," said Aglithia, amicable. "They truly are delicious."

Naptunie blushed a bit, proud of her family's food's reputation. Meanwhile, Cessilia was surprised by how calm and easy-going that woman was. Next to her, Darsan crossed his arms, visibly doubtful as well.

The dragons also reacted to this woman's presence. While Kian growled a bit, like a fair warning to a stranger, Krai tilted its large head and approached slowly. Aglithia stared right back at the dragon, completely calm and fearless despite the large size of the beast. It was as if she was perfectly familiar with dragons already. The siblings exchanged a look, and Nana was in awe too. People rarely felt anything other than fear when first meeting a dragon, especially an adult one. The enormous difference in size and the large claws and fangs usually kept even the most curious ones at a safe distance. Aglithia, however, seemed completely fascinated by the dragon and not the slightest bit intimidated. "They are two beautiful ones," she said calmly.

"How d-do you...?"

"I am not afraid," she said. "Moreover, dragons sense fear, don't they? It excites them." Darsan and Cessilia exchanged another intrigued look. That woman did know a thing or two... Soon enough, though, she turned away from the dragons to smile at them.

"Are we ready to go? Are... the others not coming, then?"

"They need t-to rest," said Cessilia.

Another reason she had refused for Ashen to come was that she didn't trust the Cheshi just yet. Their arrival had been way too timely, as if they had really waited for something to happen before intervening. Even if Aglithia seemed to have nothing but pacific intentions, she had still placed the triplets by her side from the beginning and had been watching them. Plus, Cessilia had to be doubtful of a woman who didn't fear dragons. The previous one had turned out to be quite a handful...

"Alright then, let's get going."

She turned around, and began walking back toward the Outer Wall. The three of them followed behind, both intrigued and cautious. The dragons followed them for a little while too. The streets were empty at such an early hour, partly because of the poor weather of the past few days. Only a few intrigued eyes that were in the streets at that time curiously followed the strange quartet and the two dragons behind them.

Aglithia seemed familiar with the streets. Twice, she suddenly turned into small alleys that people foreign to the place would have missed. The dragons had to take extra detours and jumps to keep up, Krai even trying to get on the roofs until Cessilia called it down.

"Sorry," said Aglithia. "I don't think they will be able to follow us much farther..."

To their surprise, she had taken them to a small building that looked like one of the little shops in the Outer Market. It seemed to have been closed for a while, but Aglithia went in anyway, clearly very familiar with the place. She asked all three of them to come in, and for Darsan to close the door behind them. The space was actually so small that he had to lower his head a couple of times to not hit some pots hanging from the ceiling. Cessilia looked around. It seemed like this place was a simple pottery shop during the day...

Aglithia walked behind the counter and into a small room in the back made for storage. She went directly to a very large chest, taking the things on top of it out of the way, and opening it up with a groan. Cessilia was fascinated. Everything else in the shop had a very thin layer of dust on it, except for this large trunk. Aglithia took some random things out of the safe, like wax candles and pots of paints, then what seemed like a wooden mat, and suddenly stepped inside.

"I hope none of you has an issue with confined spaces," she said.

Darsan grimaced, but none of them said anything. She grabbed one of the candles, quickly lighting it up with a little stone. Then, Aglithia's body gradually disappeared downwards. Intrigued, Nana and Cessilia went to the chest, discovering it actually had no bottom. It was probably previously covered by the wooden mat, but there was now a large hole with stairs and Aglithia's figure leading down.

"Come on. Don't worry, someone will put everything back once we're gone."

Cessilia frowned, but stepped in, helping Naptunie behind her. They each took a candle too.

"They don't have tall people, these Cheshi?" groaned Darsan behind them, who had to twist his shoulders a bit to get in.

Luckily for him, the space got larger as they went down. Cessilia was still in awe. They were clearly in a tunnel. Not only that, but a well-maintained one. The steps were made of stone and quite old, but they were only moving ridiculous amounts of dust. There were no traces of spiders or any bugs in there. The passage was also dug large enough to let someone of Darsan's width go through easily. There were even little mirrors strangely carved into the walls, and Cessilia quickly understood they were meant to help spread the light from their candles inside the tunnels. For a while, none of them said a word. Cessilia could feel Nana walking very close to her, probably a bit worried, and from time to time, they heard Darsan grumble and complain about the uneven ceiling above them. She was even more intrigued by the fact that they kept going down.



Suddenly, the steps stopped, and they found themselves in a flat tunnel, going two ways: left or right.

"The right one takes us to the castle," said Aglithia, "but I don't recommend we go there today, it would be risky to be found on the other end. The Yekara have seized control of the castle."

"Is th-this how the t-triplets had followed us t-too?"

"Yes," nodded Aglithia. "They had orders that at least one of them should remain with you at all times. Not that you needed protection, but we thought it would be better to keep an eye on you... that's how we learned what had happened. They

warned us as soon as they realized the Royal Guards were preparing for a fight..."

That explained how Aglithia had appeared so soon at Bastat's safehouse...

"These tunnels..." muttered Nana. "How are they possible? If I'm right, right now... we're under Soura's bed!"

"That's right," nodded Aglithia. "See, the Soura wasn't always such a big river, nor this high. Centuries ago, this tunnel was one of many bridges on the ground level... but as the river began to get higher and higher, it had to be reinforced. So now, it is a tunnel all but the Cheshi Clan have forgotten about. So, we made sure to keep it safe, and use it for our clan's needs. Not too often, of course..."

"So you guys really are spies," said Darsan. "I thought so. Your steps barely make any noise, and you're skinny but not weak. I knew it!"

"We have several specialties," Aglithia answered with a smile. "Collecting information is one of them... It might even be our greatest strength."

"If you know so m-much," said Cessilia, "I w-wonder why you never g-got involved before such t-terrible things happened."

"...Things are sometimes more complex than they seem," she sighed, "even in just one clan. But you'll understand a lot more soon. We're almost there..."

Indeed, stairs had appeared ahead leading upward. Cessilia had also tried to do a bit of math in her head, and she was sure they had walked farther than the bridge's length, far above their heads. This tunnel was impressive, considering how long it was and the pressure of the water that came from above. How many more did the Cheshi have, hidden like this? They probably had dozens of secret locations scattered in the Capital as well...

"Watch your heads..."

Aglithia began to climb up without warning. To their surprise, the way up was much shorter than when they had climbed down. Natural light finally spilled in, but this time, they stepped inside what looked like a cave. They came through a normal

door, although it was simply hidden by a heavy tapestry. Coming out seconds after Aglithia, Cessilia took note of the many, many shelves of stored food around them. There were hundreds of pots filled with grains, herbs, dried meat, and even some oils, from the smell.

"This is the winter food storage room of our main residence," smiled Aglithia.

"I was expecting a better concealment for this door," Darsan raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, don't worry. We have security measures just in case this secret tunnel is found. We can have it collapse in just seconds if it's ever compromised."

Nana and Darsan both shuddered. To think the long tunnel they had just come out of could have crumbled over them was terrifying...

"Come on. I'll take you to our Clan Leader. He's expecting you... To be honest, we all are. It's our first time meeting Dragon Masters in centuries."

"...D-did you know about J-Jisel's dragon?"

"No. We had suspicions, but she kept it hidden well until yesterday. We had only found traces of that dragon up until now."

She didn't sound like she was lying.

Aglithia took them out of the storage room, and to Cessilia's surprise, they stepped into a courtyard very much like the ones in the Dragon Empire's Imperial Palace. The architecture was strikingly similar, although it was on a smaller scale.

Darsan seemed to have noticed too, his dark eyes looking all around in surprise.

"Th-this place..."

"Feels like home?" chuckled Aglithia. "I figured it would. You'll understand in a moment."

She made them walk past several rooms that looked like two studies, a library, another storage room, and a residential

area. Finally, she knocked on a door, and stepped in right away.

They walked into a large, round room. It was an office, still mostly lit by several candles, with two people standing at

the large desk and a big window behind them. On their left was an enormous bookcase, filled with dozens of old books,

parchments, and all sorts of papers that were rolled or piled up. There was even a table in front of them with a tray holding a

large teapot, and a couple of roughly drafted maps. What caught their eyes first, though, was the large fireplace with a strange

work of art above it. It was held on little metallic pins and incomplete, but both Cessilia and Darsan immediately recognized

the skeleton of a baby dragon.

"Oh, finally."

The people behind the desk raised their eyes from the document they were looking at.

They were obviously related,

their facial features so similar they could even have passed for siblings. The woman was obviously much older, though. She had gorgeous white hair arranged in two buns and the rest of it falling down to her waist. The man had his hair cut much shorter, with a side of it shaved clean. Both of them were covered in those unique dots and line tattoos like Aglithia, and wore similar leather clothes. The woman wore a lot of jewelry, though, mostly stones, and around her neck, a thin silver chain with a unique dragon tooth as a pendant.

“Morning greetings,” said Aglithia, stepping aside. “Princess Cessilia, Lady Naptunie, and...”

“Darsan.”

“Prince Darsan, let me introduce you to my father, Lord Marau our Clan Leader, and my dear grandmother, Elder Olea.”

“It is an honor to meet you,” said the old lady, immediately stepping forward.

To their surprise, this elder bowed to them, her striking blue eyes glistening with tears. Behind her, her son did the

same, although he didn’t look as moved and was more closed off. His bow was shorter, and when he stood back up, his eyes seemed cold.

“Welcome to the Cheshi Clan,” he said. “I am sorry we did not get to meet earlier, Prince, Princess.”

Cessilia nodded, a bit perplexed. She hadn’t seen people react like this to her in a long while. She was also confused

by this whole room and the atmosphere. Aglithia stepped forward, facing her father’s cold stare. Either she was used to it, or she didn’t care at all.

“Father. Did you think about my request this morning?”

The Cheshi Clan Leader’s eyes shifted from his daughter to Cessilia and Darsan. She realized he seemed young to have

a daughter Aglithia’s age, who was probably as young as herself... and she was his third daughter. He didn’t have blue eyes

like his mother, but everything else screamed they were family, and Aglithia too. He was the one with the most visible tattoos,

so much it covered more than half of his skin. After a while, he faintly nodded.

“...You may take them there. Mother.”

“I will lead the way,” nodded the old lady, stepping forward.

She grabbed a long white cane that was leaning against the wall, and smiled at Cessilia.

“Let’s head out, Princess,” she said. “We have a lot to show you and not much time!”

She left the room, and after a hesitation, they all followed after her. Once the door was closed, Cessilia couldn’t help

but glance back. She had expected better for an interaction with the Clan Leader... especially if she was to convince him to side

with them against the Yekara.

“Don’t worry about my father,” said Aglithia, who had noticed. “He’s not as stern as he looks!”

“He doesn’t like the Yekara Clan,” added her grandmother with a chuckle. “This whole situation is a little bit bothersome...”

So they weren’t completely closed off to the issues of the world outside their walls, then... Cessilia felt a bit better hearing this. Yet, the Cheshi Clan elder didn’t seem in a rush. The old lady calmly walked down the corridors, guiding them with a little smile on her lips. Cessilia was about to ask where they were headed to when she suddenly stopped in front of large double doors. To their surprise, both Aglithia and her grandmother clapped their hands, bowed their heads, and stayed silent for a few seconds before they finally pushed the doors.

They opened into a large room, but with an open roof. In front of them, on the ground was a sizable carpet with dozens of little cushions on it, as if this was a place to sit. Beyond that, against the wall, little plates of fresh food were placed, mostly fish and meat, even eggs, perfectly prepared in pretty trays and ready to eat. None of them thought about sitting down or eating, though. On the wall opposite the doors was a very large mosaic that had grabbed all their attention. Cessilia was speechless.

“Sorry about that,” chuckled Elder Olea, pushing the cushions out of the way with her cane. “We just finished the morning lesson with the young ones...”

Cessilia barely heard what she had said. Next to her, even Nana had covered her mouth with her hands. The mosaic was superb and so detailed, the two creatures on it almost seemed real. They formed a circle, each of them taking up one half, one white, one black. The white one was a water dragon with blue sapphires for eyes, and the other one looked strangely like Krai, but with yellow gems as its eyes.

“Now,” chuckled the old lady, “what do you really know about dragons?”

“Nothing,” scoffed Darsan. “They are just our dragons, that’s it!”

“Those are such perfect representations of dragons,” muttered Naptunie, completely captivated by the mosaic. “This one really looks like Sir Dragon!”

“An Earth Dragon,” nodded Aglithia. “The Sea Dragon is made of nacre, the earth one of obsidian. Dragons can be of any color, though, can’t they?”

Cessilia faintly nodded.

“Mine’s yellow!” exclaimed Darsan, winking at Nana. “He looks like a nice curry beignet!”

“How...? What is th-this?” Cessilia finally asked, turning to Elder Olea. “I d-don’t understand.”

The old lady smiled gently.

“This is our prayer room to the Ancient Dragon Gods. These two dragons here are not like the dragons of your family, Princess. They represent the very first dragons that came to this continent, thousands of years ago. Dragons that were much, much more powerful, ancient and large. The first and only, the original Dragon Gods. It is a very old tale to most, but to our clan and family, it is a precious legend that shall never be forgotten.”

She stepped closer to the mosaic, staring at it fondly.

“This piece of art is merely a representation, a reminder of our family’s devotion to the Ancient Dragon Gods. Even as time goes by, we keep transmitting this epic legend that has become our family’s pillar. We are the guardians of a history that shall never be engraved, written, or kept anywhere but in our minds.”

She turned to them, and slowly, with her granddaughter’s help, sat down on the cushions. Naptunie glanced toward the siblings but, noticing that neither of them had moved or intended to sit, she didn’t try to either. Neither did Aglithia, who simply stood next to her grandmother.

“As I said,” continued the old lady, “this legend goes back many, many centuries, when there was only this vast piece of land and the sea surrounding it. The first two creatures to be born were a pair of dragons. One dragon was born from the earth’s core, the other dragon came from the depths of the sea. They were a pair, but neither siblings, nor mates. Their bond went far beyond those human concepts. They were gods, paired for eternity.” Cessilia’s eyes went to the mosaic on the wall. The dragons were represented facing each other, in a circle. For someone who knew dragons, their position was one that two dragons would have taken when playing together...

“For a very long time, the two dragons were free and alone to roam the continent and play in the vast sea. One day, a group of men and women came to this continent, crossing the sea and reaching the shore. They had come from far, far away, to find a new land to call home. It was the first time the dragons met humans, and the opposite was also true. They couldn’t understand each other, but they soon realized the other was intelligent and kind. For the first time, men and dragons became friends and allies. They observed each other, discovering the secrets of a new kind and learning from one another. The one thing that dragons were bewildered by the most was the humans’ ability to mate and procreate. The two dragons had been alone together for centuries... they had never imagined having a progeny. One had been born from the earth, the other from the sea.

Yet, humans were not only reproducing, but as time went on, the dragons saw generations and generations of them being born.

They became fascinated with the humans, and began to wish to have their own offspring, as well. However, as powerful as they were, the Dragon Gods had been born with no ability to procreate themselves. So, they set off to find a solution, roaming the continent and seas in hopes of finding an answer. Sadly, they found none. Instead, they witnessed all the other kinds of creatures in the world giving birth to their own offspring, and became more and more desperate to have their own."

"That is so sad for them..." muttered Nana, completely absorbed by the story. "To see it for centuries but not be able to have their own..."

"Exactly," nodded Elder Olea. "So, disheartened, the dragons went back to see their human friends, hoping that, together, they could find a solution. More time passed, during which the humans kept their future generations studying for the sake of their dragon friends. The dragons lived in harmony with the humans, both species helping each other. Meanwhile, more humans arrived on the land, different tribes that had come from other, farther lands. The dragons remained with the original tribe of humans that had been by their side for centuries, the only ones who had remained loyal to them. The other humans were greedier; they tried to befriend the dragons for their own sakes, for greed and power. Jealousy began to flourish between the humans that were allies with the dragons and the others. Soon, fights began. Yet, the humans begged the dragons to stay out of it.

They believed the greed of men was man's problem, and the dragons should remain sacred, untamed, and untainted by such sin.

Sadly, as time went on and more human tribes attacked, their numbers dwindled. The dragons saw their friends' families decimated, the children of those they had loved for centuries killed."

"And they did nothing?" scoffed Darsan. "Dragons would be the first one to jump into the fight and grill a..."

He stopped talking after noticing Cessilia and Naptunie glaring at him. He grimaced, and mumbled an apology, putting his hands behind his back.

"Of course," resumed the old lady. "There came a time when the dragons couldn't take it anymore. The humans they loved had become so few, soon there would be none left. The dragons refused to stay away any longer, and met with the young couple that led the tribe of their beloved humans. Coincidentally, that young couple had yet to have any children. They had experienced the dragons' desire for children so much that they had become the closest to the Dragon Gods. So, together, they prayed that a new, stronger generation would be born that could protect them. They prayed for a very, very long time. The

woman and the Sea Dragon went to the sea to pray for their daughters to be born with the heart of a dragon. The man and the Earth Dragon went to the mountain, to pray for their sons to be born with the strength of a dragon.”

“What happened next,” said Aglithia, “is the most important part, yet the one we don’t exactly understand. Our ancestors said that their prayers united, and the woman got pregnant by a miracle. The dragons were so relieved that they kept praying throughout her pregnancy. They swore to the sea and earth they had come from that they would give up their own immortality for the children to be born as strong as a dragon, with the heart of a dragon.” “Exactly,” nodded her grandmother. “Many moons later, the woman gave birth to a boy, first. A strong, healthy boy with a skin as dark and tough as a dragon’s scale, eyes that could see far more than any human, and a stomach that could handle fire. Not only that, but that boy could communicate with the Earth Dragon so well that they were both thinking the same thing, always, at the exact same time.”

Cessilia and Darsan exchanged a glance. Now that sounded very familiar to them... “As the firstborn, the boy was set to become the new leader of the tribe and protect his family against the invaders. The Earth Dragon’s soul was tied to this boy. They shared everything: their strength, their desires, and their pain too. Together, they set off to reconquer the land of the boy’s ancestors.”

“What about the Sea Dragon?” asked Naptunie.

“The Sea Dragon kept praying all this time. Seeing what had become of its counterpart and the woman’s son, the Sea Dragon and the mother prayed for another child to be born, one that would cherish life and be brave, but also kind. Soon, a beautiful daughter was born. She had the skin as white as the Sea Dragon, and could swim like a fish. Her voice was said to be able to stop wars, and make men and the sky cry together as one. Just like her brother, her soul was united to the Sea Dragon’s soul. That pair of siblings became the very first Dragon Masters.”

“Like our f-family,” muttered Cessilia.

“No, not like your family,” said Aglithia. “This is your family. Your ancestors, long ago in history, were the dragon owners.”

“That’s right, Princess,” nodded Elder Olea. “Your father is a descendant of the Earth Dragon’s master, and your mother, a descendant of the Sea Dragon’s mistress.”

“No, wait. It doesn’t make sense,” said Darsan. “I get it for Dad, but... Mom ain’t got a dragon. None of her people did.”

“That’s also explained in the legend,” answered Aglithia, “or more like, there’s a reason for it.”

“Once the siblings’ souls were bonded to the dragons,” nodded Lady Olea, “the dragons began to know pain, disease, and aging for the very first time since they had been born. They had traded their immortality, just like they had wished. However, as they were now too attached to humans, the dragons began to also be drawn into human conflicts. The brother and the Earth Dragon fought many wars, while the sister and the Sea Dragon healed many. However, once their humans grew into adulthood, the dragons began to differ on the future they wanted. They loved each other, but when time came for their humans to carry their own children, and the two gods realized their own progeny were to come into the world as well, they just couldn’t agree on the wish they wanted for their future generations. The Earth Dragon wanted its progeny to be as strong as its human, and go on for a long time. The Sea Dragon, however, felt sad about their offspring being tied to humans and their wars forever, and wanted to be sure they were born in a safe place. Hence, they transmitted their wish for the next generation to their humans.” The old lady sighed, and got back up, walking up to the mosaic. She put a hand on the Black Dragon, staring at it with an enigmatic expression.

“First, the Earth Dragon’s children would carry its strength and power, and pass it on to his sons and daughters. As the first master had been a man, only men would carry on the blood of a dragon soulmate. Masters of the Earth Dragons would remain strong, for the sake of protecting their own families. Indeed, when its first sons were born, the Earth Dragon witnessed the birth of his own first offspring. The daughters also carried its blood, but no dragons were born, for only males could partner with the Earth Dragon.”

Elder Olea smiled, and then moved a bit, this time to face the White Dragon but not touch it, her hands on her cane.

“Meanwhile, the Sea Dragon decided to lie in wait, and pray for a while longer, for a time when its children would be born safely. The Sea Dragon passed on to the sister all of its knowledge and hope, and told her its blood would protect her daughters forever. However, it still feared men’s greed would harm its offspring, and so, no more Sea Dragons were born, and it only kept aging and aging, staying by the side of the sister’s daughters instead. When the Earth Dragon, who had lost its immortality after giving birth to too many heirs, was ready to finally die, the Sea Dragon made him a promise. ‘I shall wait,’ it said, ‘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 into 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.” A faint silence followed her last sentence, all a bit moved by the story. Nana sniffled, wiping the little tears in her eyes.

“It’s so sad and beautiful at the same time,” she mumbled. “What happened to the Sea Dragon, then...?”

“According to the legend,” said Aglithia, “it didn’t die with the sister. The Sea Dragon stayed by the Earth Dragon’s side until it died, and then, it went into hiding, in a safe place where no human could reach, to wait until it could witness their offspring being reunited again.”

“S-so you’re saying...” muttered Cessilia, “my mother’s Rain T-Tribe was... the Sea D-Dragon’s daughters’ p-people?”

“Mom and Auntie had songs like that,” said Darsan, “about... scaled women, and a Dragon God. That... I mean, that could be it, right?”

“I’m sure those legends perdured in many ways,” nodded Elder Olea, “but yes, Princess, that is true. Your parents are the descendants of each of those Dragon Gods’ very first soulmates.”

“As you probably guessed,” added Aglithia, “the Dragon Empire was conquered by the children of the Earth Dragon.

As promised, they had regained all the lands taken by the other tribes, and ruled over them with their dragons by their side.

They once ruled over everything, but the Eastern Kingdom appeared later, when more tribes arrived and gained back territory.

There were too many humans by then, so they became rulers instead, and kept winning as many wars as needed to preserve

their territory as it is today. Meanwhile, the descendants of the Sea Dragon, who refused to wage war, went into hiding in more isolated places, where no one would be likely to attack them.”

“The swamps,” nodded Darsan. “Yeah, Mother said nobody wanted to live there until her tribe’s people were raided to be taken as slaves...”

“That’s... amazing!” shouted Nana, almost jumping on her feet. “Cessi, I can’t believe your family’s story is so amazing!

It is so epic, I wish it was in a history book so I could read it again and again! No, in several books!”

“Our family forbids the legend to ever be written down,” said Aglithia. “It shall only be passed down orally, to prevent anyone from ever getting to know the secret of the dragon owners, except themselves!”

“But... then, how do the Cheshi people know so much?” asked Nana, tilting her head. “If you’re not... you know, neither the sister’s nor the brother’s descendants...”

Elder Olea smiled, and turned to Cessilia.

“Can you guess who we are, then, Princess?”

“...You’re all th-the others,” she said confidently. “The Cheshi p-people are the rest of the siblings’ t-tribe. The f-first humans who c-came and befriended the Dragon G-Gods...”

Aglithia smiled and nodded proudly.

“Exactly! Therefore, we don’t usually meddle in the affairs of the Eastern Kingdom... Our people decided to stay where they had always been, near the area they first arrived. During their conquest, the heirs of the Earth Dragon went to the west, but we decided to remain here, as our tribe’s history is here. The Sea Dragon was also last spotted here, on the beach of the Soura... The history of this continent is so deeply rooted into the legend that we treasure so much, our tribe decided to remain here forever, regardless of who the ruler of the land was. We are much older than any of the tribes here, and more familiar with dragons too. That’s why we couldn’t help but to observe you from afar...”

“What a-about Ashen?”

Cessilia’s angry tone gathered their attention, even cooling down Naptunie’s enthusiasm. Behind her, Darsan crossed his arms with a scowling look. Cessilia stepped forward, visibly upset.

“Th-thank you for t-telling us the history of our d-dragons, but as we s-speak, the Yekara C-Clan is still trying to t-take over your homeland. They t-ried to kill Ashen t-too. I c-can’t simply sit here and listen t-to your stories if you’re not g-going to help us at all. I d-don’t understand what your intention is here.”

Aglithia exchanged a look with her grandmother, the two of them giving a quick nod. Then, the young woman stepped forward, calmly.

“As I said, Princess Cessilia, the Cheshi have never gotten involved in the wars of this Kingdom. To us, the legitimate rulers of the Eastern Kingdom are the Earth and Sea Dragons’ heirs. We vowed to never get involved, unless one of the Dragons—”

“The D-Dragons are gone!” Cessilia suddenly shouted.

Her fists clenched, she stepped forward, furious, running out of patience.

“The dragons you were t-talking about are b-both gone,” she said, “and my family did not t-take back the Eastern KKingdom either! We may b-be the descendants of those Dragon G-Gods, but this is a story from d-dozens of centuries ago! You c-can’t just ignore the p-people living here now and k-keep living in the past! This is something that is happening n-now, and you are s-staying aside for the sake of a centuries-old t-tale? You c-can’t do this! This K-Kingdom needs your help, now!

Ashen n-needs you to side with him to t-take back his home! He is the only K-King these people need!”

A long silence followed her words, where everyone stood perfectly still. After a few seconds, though, a faint smile

appeared on Aglithia's lips, and she turned to her grandmother.

"...See? I told you she was a great princess, Grandma."

Elder Olea chuckled, nodding.

"Indeed, indeed. Ah... It makes me so proud of what our venerated dragons' blood has become. Princess Cessilia, I am sorry for the lengthy explanation, but I am happy with your response."

"You are?" Darsan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. See, our Cheshi Clan has sadly become very divided over this precise matter and the current situation. Some of

us fully agree with what Princess Cessilia said. We cannot stand idly by and be passive forever... this may no longer be the

home to the dragons' offspring, but this is still our homeland. Some of us would like to support King Ashen the White, but

others were more mitigated. We have pondered for a while whether to help him out or not, whether that blood of his was

enough for us to finally get involved in the Kingdom's succession."

"...What? His b-blood?" muttered Cessilia, confused. "What are you t-talking about?"

Aglithia put on a dampened smile, caressing one of her tattoos with her fingers enigmatically.

"See," said Aglithia, "there is something about King Ashen the White that makes him a bit different from all of the other

kings our clan has seen on the throne of the Eastern Kingdom. For a long time, we cared little about other tribes fighting over

this throne, as we knew none of them to be the real heirs to this land. But King Ashen... might be the first one in a while to have

us recognize him as the real heir."

Cessilia's eyes went back and forth between Elder Olea and Aglithia, confused. What was it about Ashen's blood that

made him different from his predecessors? They wouldn't recognize someone who wasn't related to the Dragons' heirs, and

they had been against his father too... Suddenly, Cessilia understood.

"...His m-mother."

"Yes," nodded Aglithia. "...She was a Cheshi."

## Chapter 23

Cessilia was rendered speechless. Ashen's mother belonged to the Cheshi Clan... She would have never guessed. Yet,

it made a bit of sense. His mother had to belong to a clan for a single woman to be able to live in the Capital in such troubled

times, and even be able to raise three boys by herself.

"I d-don't understand. If she was a Ch-Cheshi, then why d-didn't you help her when...?"

"That woman had chosen a way of life different from our own," sighed Elder Olea. "She was trained, educated, and

raised like any child of our clan. However, when she came of age, she refused to marry her fiancé within our clan and left.

Soon enough, she was carrying another man's child... Little did we know, she was to conceive the Tyrant King's heirs."

“So... Ashen d-doesn't know?”

“Most likely not,” said Elder Olea. “His mother had cut all ties with us, and once she had decided to carry on with her life outside of the clan, we didn't intervene anymore. Still, we never let one of our own really fall far from our sight. Hence, we kept observing that young man and his younger brothers, although we did not wish to get involved... We did extend a hand to his mother in difficult times, but that stubborn woman never accepted it. His father, being the man he was, made us doubt his sons would be any different after their mother passed.” Darsan scoffed.

“You guys... I think you missed my sister's point here. Nobody gives a dragon's fart where that guy came from, or who his parents were. Her boyfriend's your damn King, he fought hard to get there, even without your help. You should just stop talking and help him.”

Cessilia smiled at her older brother, a bit glad for his help. Despite his external appearance and blunt way of speaking,

Darsan was soft-hearted, and he did like Ashen a lot as well.

“We did help the young King, for a time,” sighed Elder Olea. “In indirect ways, we tried to protect those boys,

sometimes providing food in such ways they wouldn't suspect our meddling, and guarding them safely when possible. Sadly, the situation wasn't such that we could afford to watch estranged children of the clan more than our own. Yet, the young Ashen gathered even more of our interest when he rose from the dead, carrying a dragon's skin at that. We had a hunch he had gotten some... help, from the Dragon Empire, but we were especially surprised to see a princess arrive at his side. Since then, we have been reconsidering him as a more fitting leader, but a lot happened, of course.”

“The way he got rid of the Kunu Tribe made us be especially careful,” added Aglithia.

“To see a whole tribe killed and chased down overnight... It wasn't just us. Although the Kunu had gone overboard, a lot of tribes feared that King Ashen was too similar to his father. No one wanted to become his next enemy. As for us, we decided to withdraw, and wait and see how he would mature as a King.

“Of course, his reign wasn't only marked by such terrible events,” nodded her grandmother. “The way he picked a wise counselor despite the Lords' judgment, or how he erected walls despite the protests to keep the Capital safe were commendable, but there was a lot to be done. Sincerely, we thought we would witness him evolve for better or worse in the upcoming years, but the Lords pushing for him to pick a wife did get our interest. Just when we thought he'd reveal his true

nature when choosing his bride, you appeared, Princess Cessilia. Needless to say, our clan was quite shaken up by the news.

We thought we should meet you first. Aglithia and the triplets, who were already planted long ago in the castle, did watch you

from afar, as you already know, until today when we decided to make contact. I am sorry we did not find the right timing to

reach out to you sooner, and as for King Ashen, I am truly sorry we did not pay more attention to his mother's lineage, but that

woman... she was rather... clear, when she cut ties with our clan."

"Only because she refused to marry her fiancé?" Cessilia frowned.

Aglithia and her grandmother exchanged a glance.

"...She was betrothed to my father," Aglithia finally said.

Cessilia was taken aback. So, Ashen's mother should have become the Clan Leader's wife... No wonder her situation

became complex and peculiar for the clan after she cut ties and basically ran away.

"Most of the Cheshi Clan's people are aware of King Ashen's lineage," said Aglithia.

"For a long time, the elders were

quite divided on whether we should finally take a more active position or not. Some were still... offended by his mother's

actions, and want us to not consider him as one of us anymore. Others think we should have acted earlier. Thankfully, your

arrival did simplify things a lot."

Cessilia was conflicted about the Cheshi Clan's actions. Although she understood some of their decisions, her heart

was still aching for the young Ashen who had gone through so many hardships, all because of the adults' selfishness. She

glanced at her brother, but Darsan simply shrugged with a smug expression.

"So?" he asked. "What's your position now? Because my sis could use some support right now. So could that King,

from what we've seen."

"No matter what," said Aglithia, "we never got along with the Yekara Clan, but they were also cautious to avoid

messing with us. What happened last night, though, was definitely a turning point. My father agreed for us to meet you, and offer

you the strength of the Cheshi Clan."

"...You know, tale-telling is not going to cut it," groaned Darsan, raising an eyebrow.

"That was a nice story, but how is that helpful to us?"

Elder Olea chuckled, and stepped forward.

"Our clan is not only about keeping the memory of the Dragon Gods. For a very, very long time after the siblings that

originally carried their souls passed, we also vowed to protect the will of the Dragon Gods. Their ultimate will was their

progeny's safety and a peaceful land for them to prosper in. I think we will agree that sadly, the Eastern Kingdom is no longer

at peace. Thus, it is indeed time for us to act, Princess Cessilia. Come with me."

Following the old lady, they all left the prayer room. Cessilia couldn't help but glance one last time at the beautiful mosaic of the dragons behind her. She had no idea a portion of her family history had been hidden here all along, so far from the place she called home. It felt like they had truly dove in and unburied some secrets that were missing without them even knowing they needed that piece of the puzzle... She had been raised with dragons, and Cece, Krai, and all the other dragons of her family members had always been such a big part of her life. Still, Cessilia had consistently been one of the most curious among her siblings, and at times, she had wondered what made their family so special for them to be life-bound to such majestic creatures. Now, at least, she had some answers. Of course, there were probably some creative parts in the legend, or things that had been lost and changed over the years, but she could still see how it fit with her family history. In fact, it explained a lot of things...

"There is still something I don't understand," whispered Naptunie while they were following the grandmother-granddaughter duo. "If the legend is right, and from a scholar point of view, well, I'm still very, uh... surprised. But, if we were to believe the legend, then... why did Lady Cessilia have a dragon, and Tessa didn't...? Not that I think you shouldn't! I understand your brothers have water dragons because your mothers were part of the Sea Dragon's descendants, and so, it probably prevails on the Earth Dragons somehow, but..."

Cessilia frowned, thinking about how to answer this when she only had pieces of information, but before she did, they both heard Darsan sigh behind them.

"Our mom told us about that legend thing, about a very old Dragon God she once met underwater that saved her life.

She always stayed vague about it, but Kassian, Cessi, and I heard that story a lot. ...I mean, we never really knew how much of it was true, and we were kids when she told us that, but... what's true is that Mom wasn't around after Kassian was born. He was born during the war against that screwed up uncle of ours that Dad and Auntie Shareen got rid of, but Mom wasn't there after the war. Kassian always says he has no memory of Mom before I was born, and Dad doesn't talk about it either, but the aunts from the Onyx Castle all said he was alone with Kassian for a long time. No one wants to say what happened to Mom, but... we heard some stuff."

Cessilia nodded.

"It d-does match what Elder Olea s-said a bit..."

"I see..." muttered Naptunie, visibly absorbed in her thoughts again. "So your mother would be... Oh..."

Cessilia glanced ahead, but if Aglithia and her grandmother had heard anything of their exchange with Naptunie, they were both pretending otherwise.

As the Cheshi duo guided them through the property, Cessilia was only beginning to realize how vast this place really was. From what she could see, their main residence had high walls and many large square patios, where they crossed paths with some people bearing similar tattoos to Aglithia, and some who had none. Either way, all those people were surprisingly very physically fit. Perhaps because she had never seen the other Cheshi before, Cessilia was even more surprised that they didn't really seem to match the rumors. In fact, only the Cheshi with tattoos were seen carrying around large volumes, in corners reading or writing, and exchanging with other people who also had tattoos. On the other hand, all the Cheshi that didn't have any were more often than not training, or clearly on their way to, carrying weapons or in a fitting outfit.

"Lady Aglithia," she asked. "C-can I ask... about those t-tattoos you have. I see a lot of you have th-them, is there any pparticular meaning to them?"

"There is," nodded Aglithia, a bit proud. "It means we are holders of some of the clan's secrets! You see, we not only know a lot about dragons, but our family has specialized in transmitting our knowledge orally, as much as possible, and some of that knowledge is centuries old. Thus, to know which of us holds a particular knowledge, we receive our tattoos when we complete learning a particular course of the clan. We are all free to study what we want, but those with the most tattoos are basically the most knowledgeable among us."

"What my proud grandchild fails to mention, is that it is also a means of defense," added her grandmother.

"How so?" asked Nana, whose eyes were literally shining bright with deep interest.

"Some things are only known within our clan," explained Aglithia, "and some secret knowledge can only be learned by those who have achieved particular success amongst our teachings. The most respected members of the clan are those who learned and succeeded the most and, in a way, unlocked their own access to our clan's deepest secrets. In here, knowledge is power, and we do not climb the ranks by our blood lineage but by how knowledgeable we are."

"...C-can I ask... Ashen's mother...?"

"She was a smart child," smiled Elder Olea, "but too stubborn for some teachings. She focused on her physical training more, and she was quite a balanced fighter and student."

"Yeah, about that," said Darsan, stepping forward. "What training do you guys go through?"

“We were never meant to learn the art of fighting,” said Elder Olea, “but it quickly became a necessity. While our clan remained here, the Dragon Gods’ descendants left, and we understood knowledge alone wouldn’t be enough for our clan to survive. Using the knowledge of plants and battle we had from our ancestors, we decided to keep it alive and nourish more of that knowledge so the next generations would be as good with their bodies as they would be with their minds. It turned out to be even more of a success than we thought; we remained as a neutral, unnoticed clan among many others for centuries while being able to keep our knowledge and traditions alive and protected. Thus, we decided to keep the art of spying and assassination as one of our main ways of life. A lot of children who don’t find themselves in the teachings we provide are often the most proficient in our assassination classes.”

“So you created a dual way of life,” said Darsan. “Your people just get better at one, or do both.”

“It’s a simplistic way to put it, but that’s how it is, indeed.”

They kept walking, as the questioning time was over. Cessilia was truly surprised but also relieved to find out the

Cheshi were not only scholars. As much as she enjoyed knowledge herself, she knew they would need more to go up against

the Yekara, and now it did sound like they had more of a chance... She still had to confirm that the Cheshi would help them out,

though, and time was running out. Sabael and the others were still in grave danger at the moment, and Ashen was in no

condition for another battle, either. Cessilia faintly clenched her fist. She had to convince the Cheshi to help out; none of the

other tribes would be as pivotal in the upcoming fight.

“I heard about you,” Aglithia suddenly said to Naptunie. “For a Dorosef, you seem more like you would have thrived among our clan!”

“Hm? I’m happy with being a child of the Dorosef, though...” muttered Nana, tilting her head. “I am not sure I would be

really happy here. I like to study what I want.”

“You can study what you want here too!” replied Aglithia, a bit offended. “But you would have access to so much more

knowledge compared to the rest of the Kingdom. We are almost as good in medicine as the Hashat are, and we know sewing

and knitting techniques the best artisans of the Sehsan Tribe have yet to discover.

...Wouldn’t you be curious about that?”

For a while, Naptunie remained silent, looking down with a frown on and a complex expression. Behind her, Darsan

had his eyes riveted on her, visibly very curious about what she was going to answer to that. Cessilia couldn’t help but chuckle



a bit at her older brother's behavior. He was literally mesmerized by Nana's every word and action... She wondered if it really was a trait of her family that they were fascinated by the object of their affection. To see a big and usually rowdy Darsan all tamed and quiet by the small and introverted Nana was just too adorable to witness... Those two were truly a perfect and improbable pair. Cessilia began silently rooting for them, although Naptunie still seemed completely clueless about the attention she was getting from Darsan.

"The more I think about it," said Nana, "the more I think I wouldn't. Hm... Yes, I'm definitely not fit to be a Cheshi."

"Why?" Aglithia insisted.

Naptunie stopped walking and turned to her, her big bright eyes expressing full honesty.

"I wouldn't like it," she said. "How you have to keep everything to yourself. Maybe because I was raised as a Dorosef

indeed... You know, my tribe likes sharing with others. We fish not just to feed our people, but to feed everyone in the Capital.

My dad is the happiest when people tell him they like his fish, regardless of who they are. We are one of the clans that gets

along the best with others, you know? I like the way my people interact with the rest of the Kingdom. It's true I like studying,

and I really like books, but... I like it most when I can share what I know with others!

What's the point of learning and getting

so good at something if you're not going to share that knowledge with others? I even taught my auntie how to improve our flour

with everything I learned, and we found new ways to keep the fish fresher longer too...

but, your clan isn't like that. You chose

to stay in this Kingdom, but you kept all those books and knowledge to yourselves... I understand it's for your protection, but I

don't really understand what you're protecting it from. I think... I think it's really a loss.

So, I'm really fine being a Dorosef

girl. I wouldn't want to be like you at all!"

She finished just like that, simply shrugging, so honest she wasn't even feeling a bit sorry for her words. Naptunie

resumed walking behind Elder Olea, the old lady having a faint smile on her lips, while Aglithia was left behind, completely

speechless and stunned. Meanwhile, Cessilia smiled too, resuming her walk shortly

after Nana. Darsan quickly caught up

behind her, gently touching his sister's arm, his eyes still riveted on Nana. This time, a large smile was stuck on his face.

"Cessi... She's great, isn't she? She's so smart, right?"

"Th-that's our Nana," nodded his sister with a bright smile.

"Damn... Yeah, I've decided. Sis, I'm definitely going to marry that woman."

Cessilia couldn't help but chuckle at her brother's strong resolution, but she knew Darsan was very serious. Of course,

she'd support him fully. Naptunie deserved a good man like Darsan. Despite his strong and rough exterior, he was a very wellraised guy, with a strong sense of justice and responsibilities. Cessilia even suspected he was secretly their strict grandmother's favorite.

"I agree with my grandchild," chuckled Elder Olea. "Your way of life may differ from ours, but obviously, you would have thrived among the Cheshi, child."

"Thank you," said Naptunie with a smile on her face.

"D-don't you ever interact with other c-clans or t-tribes at all, then?" asked Cessilia. "Not even th-the Hashat?"

"To be honest, Princess, we doubt the Hashat's interest in the Rain Tribe. What are we supposed to think of a tribe that made all their fortune from the knowledge of slaves they acquired by force and money? Even if they created families, we still had a hard time believing their pure intentions, if there were any. I do regret we weren't more forthcoming in mixing with other tribes, but... understand us. Our tribe has survived for centuries on secrecy and doubt. We do not change our ways so easily."

"What about now?" asked Darsan with a frown. "Because if you aren't going to help, my sis and I should leave right now, Grandma."

Cessilia chuckled, but her brother's blunt questions were at least forcing the elder to be more clear. Elder Olea nodded.

"Oh, we will help," she said. "We might be late to the party, but we did not come unprepared. Princess Cessilia and her allies will get our full support from now on. The young lady has more than proven her worth in our eyes and, through her, so did our stubborn King. The decision was made yesterday after we heard of what had happened during that second banquet... It is regrettable that so many good people were unfairly killed. Plus, we are not so blind as to believe that once we are the only ones left, the Yekara will leave us be. This Kingdom is bleeding from the inside already, and we are not going to simply watch it fall into the hands of those wretched people. We are ready. Which is why we fetched you so early this morning. To show you this."

In a timely manner, the old lady finally stopped in front of another pair of large doors. Then, she pulled out a long chain necklace from under her clothes, and quickly took one of the many keys out that were secretly hanging there. Cessilia was surprised. She had been walking three feet away from that woman for a long while, and she hadn't suspected she was wearing a set of keys at all... This kind of necklace should have made some noise, yet somehow, there had been absolutely nothing. She

exchanged a quick glance with Darsan, who was also staring at it with a confused expression. Elder Olea was probably very well respected for reasons other than her age... She opened the large doors with that key, and suddenly, they were all blinded by the vivid colored lights that shone from within.

“Holy... By a dragon’s b—”

Darsan coughed a bit, but he couldn’t stop staring at the vision in front of them. Cessilia was just as stunned.

An armory. They were standing at the doorway of a unique and very impressive armory.

There were exactly twelve sets

of armor, each of a different but vibrant color, presented with twice as many matching weapons around them, and other various

pieces of equipment for battle. The most impressive thing about the armor, though, wasn’t the handicraft, how well-maintained

they looked, or how effective they seemed. What had blinded them upon entering the room was actually the gorgeous, shining

colors of a myriad of little beads covering them. Six sets of the armor were made for women, and the other six for men, all in

different sizes. They were obviously bound by metallic or leather structures, but most of the armor, shields, and weapons’

magnificent colored parts were actually made of something unlike anything they had ever seen before.

Darsan screamed like an excited child and ran right into it, immediately going for the largest sword in store, amazed.

He hadn’t even blinked once since the doors had been opened.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said, a wide smile stuck across his face. “Is that a freaking dragon claw? Look at the size of that beauty!”

He grabbed the sword and held it with both hands. The blade was so thick and large that although he held it with his

hands in front of his belt, the tip of the sword was higher than his head. He swung the weapon for a test trial, and the simple

gush of wind that went their way spoke volumes about the destructive force of that thing, paired with Darsan’s strength.

“Several of them, actually,” said Elder Olea. “That blade was created several decades ago by our ancestors, with the

claws of a deceased dragon, like everything else in this room. All of these items are sacred to our people. We have never used

them, and instead, we waited for the right people to come and use them.”

“It’s amazing...” muttered Naptunie.

Cessilia thought so too. She and Naptunie had naturally approached the two sets of armor closest to them. The one in

front of Cessilia was clearly made for a woman, and what she had thought to be little beads were actually very small scales of

a gorgeous gray-blue color. They were obviously polished and covered with some sort of shiny varnish, but it was the perfect alignment of hundreds of small scales that truly made that armor shine like a dragon's skin under the sun.

"Are these... s-scales from a baby d-dragon?" asked Cessilia, confused.

"Oh, no," said Elder Olea. "They come from an adult one, but we broke them down and reshaped them so we could

create them into such armor. I say we, but I really mean our ancestors, who had found the techniques to use the scales, claws,

and fangs of deceased dragons to create this precious armor. Those who still lived with the heirs of the Earth Dragon, before

they moved to the west to conquer the present Dragon Empire. It has been centuries since the last piece here was produced.

With the dragons gone, we could only treasure and keep them here. Our ancestors believed that there would come a day like

this, when the true Dragon Masters would come back and need our help. I doubt they believed it would unfold in such a way,

but the day has come indeed."

"Why didn't you use them for yourself?" asked Nana.

"Try to carry one," chuckled Aglithia.

Nana frowned, a bit confused, but she tried to grab a piece that seemed to be an arm guard. Immediately, her expression

changed, and she dropped the thing right away.

"It's so heavy!"

"It is. Only someone as strong as a Dragon Master has the strength to carry such a weapon or piece of armor. Of course,

our people could have done it too with a lot of training, but since there are so few of them, we chose to keep them for when the

Dragon Masters would truly need it, and not risk damaging the precious, priceless pieces ourselves."

"So... everything in here are weapons your ancestors m-made?"

"Yes, Princess Cessilia. All of it is here, in this room. It may not be much, but in times of war, this—"

"This is awesome!" suddenly shouted Darsan.

Right as they turned to look, they heard a terrible ruckus. Naptunie even jumped behind Cessilia, protecting her ears

and hiding a bit. Cessilia, though, who was more used to this, sighed and looked at the mess.

Darsan was standing there with his eyes open wide, the sword still in his hands, and a pile of collapsed weapons,

shattered bricks from the wall, and at least three or four of the precious sets of armor broken apart at his feet. There was a

layer of dust still hanging in the air around him, and a round shield spinning, until it collapsed, loudly falling flat. An

embarrassed silence followed.

"...I'm... very sorry about that."

“Darsan...” sighed Cessilia.

She turned to Elder Olea, who looked like she was about to pass out from the shock.

“...Our precious armor!” shouted Aglithia.

“Can it be fixed?” asked Darsan, grimacing. “I promise I’ll find all the, uh... broken pieces...”

Cessilia rubbed her temples, embarrassed as well. Her brother was a walking disaster in confined spaces like this...

This was precisely why he was banned from more rooms than he was allowed in at home. He was way too strong and couldn’t

handle his strength well at times, especially when his enthusiasm got the better of him.

“I-... It’s fine,” grumbled Elder Olea, clearly still very upset. “Those are precious... They were meant for your family

anyway, but please don’t break anymore!”

Nodding with guilt all over his face, Darsan put his sword against the wall. Sadly, though, the large blade slid right

down before loudly collapsing onto the pile, making a bigger mess and breaking it even more. He sighed.

“Uh... Sorry about that too, I guess...”

Elder Olea was now sending daggers at him with her eyes. Cessilia hardly repressed a little laugh, despite her

brother’s wrongdoings. Darsan was probably not exactly the kind of heroic Dragon Master they had admired and worshiped

for decades...

“I-I’ll help you pick it up!”

To everyone’s surprise, Naptunie ran over to start gathering the fallen weapons. She pulled the smaller ones she could

carry first, putting them back where they belonged, and gently instructed Darsan to grab this one or that one, so he could do it

instead. Cessilia smiled. Not only had Naptunie managed to memorize where each piece belonged before the incident, but she

was now managing things so that Darsan was carefully taking one piece at a time under her direction, obeying and following

her every word. If she could manage Darsan, maybe Dran would finally get a bit tamer as well...

Cessilia turned to the two Cheshi women, as if the incident was a minor thing. The armor might have been incredibly

precious to the Cheshi, but dragon scales were still just a small part left behind by some of her ancestors. The knowledge of

how to craft these was probably more precious than the parts themselves.

“Th-thank you for helping us,” she finally said. “It must have b-been hard for your people, after all this t-time.”

“Not that hard,” Elder Olea shook her head, although her eyes were still watching Darsan. “In fact, those only rightfully

belong to you, Princess Cessilia. Our real help will be our men, following you into the fight.”

“R-really?”

"We're assembling them as we speak!" Aglithia nodded. "Father gave the orders already. Two hundred Cheshi assassins will be at your command!"

"...That's it?"

They turned to Darsan, who immediately grimaced, probably remembering he should watch himself after breaking a third of the room...

"I-I mean, there's a whole bunch of Yekaras out there," he said. "They are warriors, and from what we heard, at least three times that!"

"That's all we can offer," replied Elder Olea. "Our clan is always prepared to survive, but not for an actual war. We are assassins and spies, not warriors. This won't be any common war like before, either. As you know, the Yekara have already seized control of the Inner Capital."

"What d-do you know exactly?" asked Cessilia.

"They corrupted a lot of the Royal Guards," explained Aglithia. "Not only that, but we suspect they also hid a lot of the Kunu Tribe survivors, so they might have a lot more people on their side than what we first thought. Also, last night, they broke into the Pangoja's residences and robbed them, claiming they had defied the King, and were arrested. We noticed they took a lot of money in and out of the Capital, though. We suspect they are preparing an army of mercenaries willing to fight for money, just like what happened when King Ashen fought his father."

"They also threatened to burn down the houses of the people who resisted," sighed Elder Olea. "They are still searching the houses, not only for you and your allies, my lady, but for people who could defy them, like the Royal Guards who refused to be corrupted, or the leaders of the other tribes."

"Most tribes already barricaded themselves inside their houses, or had their leaders flee or hide. Sadly, most tribes won't do a thing if there's no one to guide them. The people of the Capital are terrified too. Many heard that King Ashen was heavily injured, but a lot are afraid that if he dies, the Yekara will impose their rule."

"What did they say?" asked Naptunie, who had come back to Cessilia's side. "What will they do to our people? What about my tribe?"

Aglithia turned to her with a sorry expression. She sighed, and slowly shook her head.

"They will make public executions," said Aglithia. "They already arrested a lot of people, and from what our spies gathered, the Yekara will start executing them to scare anyone who'd try to oppose them. They want to keep control of the Inner Capital without a fight, and then aim for the Outer Capital and its surroundings."

"They are scared of our dragons!" shouted Darsan. "They wouldn't use such a cowardly tactic of taking so many

hostages if they weren't scared we would fry all those bastards where they stand!"

"Th-that's our main issue," muttered his sister. "We c-can't use Kian or Krai if they k-keep the fight in the streets of the

C-Capital, Darsan. Our d-dragons could injure the people there..."

"Pff," said her brother, shrugging. "Cowards, I tell you. Don't worry, though, we'll find a way. In fact, why don't we

just use this to our advantage? We know where the bastards are. It's so much easier than when we have to pull those damn

Northerners down from their mountains for a proper fight!"

Cessilia thought about his words, and realized that he might be right. Like her older brother had said, the Yekara had

taken control of the Inner Capital, but because of the city's unique configuration, that meant they knew exactly where they were

and the fight wouldn't scatter to several fronts. In fact, it wouldn't necessarily turn into an all-out war.

"...We're g-going to need a map," she suddenly declared to the Cheshi women. "A very accurate m-map, and as much

information as you c-can get us about the Yekara."

"Of course. We will put everything you need at your disposal. Aglithia, you and the triplets stay with Lady Cessilia. I

will make sure we are ready when they need us."

"Understood, Grandmother."

Then, Cessilia turned to Darsan and Naptunie.

"We should p-pick the armor we will use for the fight. For you, Darsan, and Kassian, T-Tessa, myself, and Ashen t-too.

Nana, you t-too."

"Me? But I can't fight! I mean, I know a thing or two, but I really can't be in the middle of the battle! I'll just die, get

injured, be useless, or worse, be a danger to others!"

"Don't worry, I'll protect you!" exclaimed Darsan with a bright smile.

"At least p-pick something to protect yourself," nodded Cessilia. "S-Something you can carry, not t-too big for you."

"I'll see..."

Cessilia turned again toward Elder Olea.

"Is it r-really alright?"

"Of course, Lady Cessilia. In fact, it feels more right to me than any other action this clan has ever taken. So please,

do."

Cessilia smiled and followed Darsan and Naptunie, who were already busy choosing things as a pair, with Naptunie

smartly advising Darsan on what they should pick for her, himself, and Kassian.

Meanwhile, Cessilia quickly picked a set of

armor for Tessandra, one for herself, and their weapons too. Luckily, Tessandra, her brothers, and herself had all trained

together, so it was a quick decision as to what would be best for whom. Ashen's pick was a bit more complicated, but Darsan

and Cessilia eventually agreed. Ironically, Darsan reducing the number of items available with his clumsiness had made the whole process easier...

“Do not worry about the... damages,” sighed Elder Olea. “We will find something to do with those. We haven’t forgotten the techniques that created them... fortunately!”

“I’ll give you some of my dragon’s scales if needed,” promised Darsan.

“D-Darsan, can you and Nana g-go ahead and take those?” Cessilia asked them. “I will b-be right behind you.”

“Sure thing!”

Darsan had no issues carrying all of the armor for himself, Kassian, and Ashen alone, including their weapons, while Cessilia had hers and Tessandra’s. He left, happy to entertain Naptunie and show off his strength in carrying the heavy load, his eyes literally stuck on her the whole time. Cessilia watched them go with a little smile, before turning to Aglithia and her grandmother.

“I c-can’t help but think we are p-pushing you into a war that you c-could have been spared from...”

Aglithia and her grandmother exchanged a quick glance, both smiling faintly.

“Times change, Princess Cessilia,” said the old lady. “New generations come, and the more time I spent in this clan, the

more I realized that, perhaps, King Ashen’s mother wasn’t just an isolated case. We cannot keep our youth cloistered behind

these walls, and living like rats spying on others without ever mingling with the rest of the world we live in. Our ancestors

might have had issues with the other tribes, but what of today? Bright young women like your friend from the Dorosef Tribe are

proof that, unlike us, the other tribes have evolved, and learned to get along. ...Well, for most of them, at the very least. I

believe your arrival only brought forward something that was bound to happen to our clan sooner or later. Do not worry. We

are truly done hiding... Now, it is time we show those Yekara that King Ashen isn’t as isolated as they think, and a more

legitimate King than they claim too.”

“...So you d-do like him after all, Elder Olea,” smiled Cessilia, “d-don’t you? You’re not j-just helping because of my

b-brothers and our dragons.”

The elder chuckled, and stepped forward, taking Cessilia’s hand and giving her a little wink.

“That should stay between us, Princess, but of course I do. ...That boy was almost my grandson, after all!”

## Chapter 24

When Cessilia came back out of the tunnel, accompanied by Aglithia, she found the little shop completely empty; it



seemed like Nana and Darsan had gone ahead with the armor. It wasn't surprising; she and Aglithia had taken the extra time to select a couple of the very well-designed maps of her clan, which they were carrying now.

They went back to the streets and under the rain, quickly making their way back to Lady Bastat's house. Cessilia was glad they could cover the armor with cloaks because the shiny armor would have surely drawn some attention... She glanced to the side where the sun was starting to rise above the sea. How long did they have left? They would need to strike fast if they hoped to save Sabael and the others... too much blood had already been spilled throughout the night. She couldn't help but feel a hint of guilt. The Yekara wouldn't have attacked like this if they hadn't felt threatened by her presence. Luckily, she didn't get lost in her dark thoughts for too long; as soon as they approached the house, they heard how loud it was inside, and pushed the door open to find almost everyone busy putting their armor on already.

Naptunie was helping an overexcited Darsan secure the attachments of the large armor he had picked, one of a bright orange color, and probably the heaviest too. It was covering his shoulders, torso, and arms, with only small pieces for his waist, hips, and legs. His armor was the one most similar to regular armor, while the others were lighter. He was the only one strong enough to carry so much, although he probably didn't need all of it. On the other side of the room, Ashen and Kassian were still busy observing the ones Cessilia had picked for them, putting on piece after piece.

Despite all the ruckus in the room, Naptunie was quickly sharing with them what they had heard from the Cheshi, perfectly retelling the legend of the dragons, as well as everything they had learned about their relationship to their ancestors.

Cessilia gave the armor to Tessandra in silence so as not to interrupt Nana, and began putting her own on. The armor was indeed heavy, and it took her a while just to attach each piece.

"I'm in love with these," muttered Tessandra. "If I wasn't so worried about Sab, I'd be jumping around right now."

The armor they had picked for her fit perfectly. It was a bright, very light green color, composed of a large but molded breastplate, a large belt, and forearm, elbow, knee, and shin protectors. Unlike ordinary armor for soldiers, these were obviously made to fit the needs of dragon riders, not just for protection. The size was also adjustable thanks to the leather belts on each piece, and Tessandra was already busy moving around to test its mobility when Lady Bastat walked in.

"They are beautiful," she said, impressed. "Oh, please let me, uh... help you."

Cessilia raised her head, and saw Lady Bastat quickly walk across the room to go and help Kassian, who was visibly struggling to attach his breastplate to the back piece. They didn't exchange a word, the two of them focused on the leather piece, but Cessilia thought they were standing surprisingly close, and very calmly too... It looked as if a small bubble had appeared around them.

She turned around, finding the need to go see Ashen. She had been shy about walking up to him since they had come back. Their short interaction that morning had left her a bit uneasy, and now, she wasn't sure where things were at. The arrival of the armor and the retelling of what had happened at the Cheshi residence had taken priority over their reunion... She walked up to him. He was now standing and leaning against the table he was lying on earlier, trying to put on the silver-white armor they had picked for him.

"...How d-do you feel?" she asked.

He raised his eyes, his black irises suddenly meeting hers. For a second, she felt incredibly wary of his reaction, but much to her relief, a smile soon appeared on his lips. He finished tightening his forearm protection with one movement, and then gently placed his hands on her cheeks, caressing them gently.

"Much better, now that you're here. ...I'm sorry about earlier."

Cessilia felt relieved, finally. Ashen wasn't mad or upset at all. Instead, his eyes expressed deep regret, and one of his hands came to take hers.

"I always need... a long time to get to the answers I need," he muttered. "I'm sorry I made you suffer again."

"It's alright..."

"Cessi."

He gently lifted her chin up with his finger, making sure they'd look into each other's eyes. Cessilia smiled shyly. How strange was it that she always felt shy in front of his big dark eyes... She took a deep breath in, and nodded, leaning closer to him. They were fine now. Ashen smiled, and gently put his forehead against hers with a smile.

"...You've been busy," he muttered. "The Cheshi, huh?"

"They d-don't hate you."

"Just my luck."

"Ashen... your m-mom was one of theirs."

He frowned a bit, his eyes going down to their hands. He sighed and faintly nodded.

"I had a hunch... Perhaps a part of me always knew, and that's why I couldn't bring myself to trust them after they basically abandoned her. I know how my mom was, though. She probably wasn't very... receptive either."

"C-can you work with them?"

"I'll make do," he chuckled. "It's not like I have much of a choice... and they are still part of this Kingdom after all.

Your friend Naptunie is right. It's high time they took part in this. Plus, the armor is pretty cool indeed."

Cessilia chuckled. She liked the set she was almost done putting on too. It had a dark purple shade with pink undertones, something that reminded her of Cece. Her dragon was a very unique silver color, with shades of magenta when her scales shone...

"Will you b-be alright?" Cessilia asked with a frown. "Your injury was..."

Her eyes went down to the spot under his armor, but to her surprise, Ashen guided her fingers for her to touch his abs.

Cessilia blushed, but even more surprising, she felt the very distinct and familiar touch of smooth skin that characterized a scar.

She frowned, confused, and her fingers followed the line, confirming it. A new scar?

How could there already be such a clean

and neat scar? While she got lost in her questions, Ashen suddenly shuddered.

"Um... Cessi. It tickles."

She blushed and took her hand back, realizing she had been caressing him unintentionally. Flushed and looking aside,

Cessilia cleared her throat loudly, taking a step back.

"How... how d-did?"

"I gave him some blood."

Her eyes went to Kassian, who was ready on the side in beautiful blue-gray armor, his arms crossed and a couple new

weapons lined his back. He stepped forward, his eyes on Ashen.

"I gave him some of my blood... so he could heal faster. Dragon blood is surprisingly efficient, and we had already

established he was compatible the first time we found him..."

"Really?" exclaimed Cessilia, surprised. "I d-didnt think about that."

"You're not the only one who got lessons from mom," chuckled Kassian, giving her a quick kiss on her temple. "He's

not fully healed, but it will be enough for today. It's not like the King can take a rest day while we reconquer his Kingdom,

right?"

His green eyes went to Ashen, who nodded, an air of humility painted all over his face.

Cessilia wondered how these

two had come to an understanding while she was gone... It seemed like they had

resolved a thing or two, and now, they were

back to that precious bond of deep trust between them. She felt a bit happy about it, although she could still feel some tension.

"You look handsome in this, b-big brother," she said with a faint smile.

"Thanks. Father used to have armor like this... one made of Krai's dead scales. It wasn't as well-crafted as this, but I

was always curious about it. Krai was the only dragon that shed his scales, so there was only his that could be made, and not

enough material to replace it.”

“I’m glad these will be helpful to you!” declared Lady Aglithia. “They all suit you very well.”

Cessilia glanced around. Indeed, they had picked well. Ashen’s silver-white armor was perfect with his hair, and

covered the injured area too, which was the main reason she had picked it in the first place. Tessandra’s armor was perfect for

a very mobile bearer, and Kassian’s was a perfect balance between a heavy defense and enough freedom of movement as well.

Nana could only carry forearm protections that Darsan was helping her tighten and a small dagger, but it would probably be

enough. Cessilia had no intention to have Naptunie in the middle of the battle, anyway.

“Cessi, whatever the plan is, we should get started soon,” Tessandra declared, her eyes looking out the windows. “The

sun has nearly risen.”

Only a short span of time had passed since Cessilia and Aglithia had come back from the Cheshi household, but each

minute was unbearably precious at the moment. She nodded, and used the table Ashen had been lying on the previous night to

lay down the map in front of them.

Thanks to the Cheshi’s years of keeping an accurate track of the changes within the Capital, this was probably the most

accurate representation they could find of Aestara and its surroundings, including the four bridges. Everyone gathered around,

serious and ready to listen to Cessilia’s plan.

“We n-need to keep the fight within the Inner Capital,” she said, her finger surrounding the main island. “We c-can’t

bring Kian or K-Krai in, as they would destroy t-too much and risk harming people, b-but we can use them to c-confine the

fight.”

“If anyone tries to cross a bridge, they should grill them!”

“But we have people willing to fight in the Outer Capital too,” said Nana. “My tribe’s people that were outside the

walls are already gathering, so are the rest of the Hashat, and even the surviving Pangoja!”

“We d-don’t need to block all the bridges,” nodded Cessilia. “Krai can t-take the southeast one, Kian the northeast, and

D-Darsan the northwest. We should leave the southwest one, where we are now, open for people to c-come in and help us. If

we focus all our s-strength on one bridge, it will b-be more manageable.”

“It’s a good plan, Cessi, but we are running out of time... Sab is running out of time. We don’t have time to wait until we

reconquer all the way to the Inner Capital! They will see us coming!”

“We c-can use the Cheshi’s secret tunnels,” declared Cessilia.

Aglithia nodded, and stepped forward, pointing out several locations in the Inner Capital.

“Almost all of our secret tunnels lead to the main residence of our tribe, and from there, we have dozens of access points into the Inner Capital. We can be anywhere in minutes, and launch a simultaneous surprise attack, if we find a way to signal one group to another from far away.”

“We can use colored fires!” exclaimed Naptunie. “With the right ingredients, I can easily create fires that will blow up fast, are easy to control, and can be seen from far away!”

“Let’s do that, then,” nodded Kassian. “We can split into groups, each leading one, and start several fights in the Capital. One will be focused on rescuing the hostages, the other on invading the castle to take it back and kill the Yekara Leader, and whoever else they might put in our way.”

“Darsan will lead everyone coming from the outside and guide them into the Capital.

The breach of the gate should alert the Yekara enough and force a lot of them to come out, but it’s going to turn into an all-out battle if the citizens get involved... we risk injuring a lot of people in the process.”

“I can have my people spread the word,” said Bastat. “We can suggest the citizens stay inside, or go where it’s safe, just remain out of the streets. I’ll also try to ensure the injured are taken to the Hashat hospitals. Lady Ishira and I have grown close, I’m sure we will work well together.”

“Kassian, Aglithia, Cessilia, and I need to lead the attacks inside then,” said Tessandra. “I’m sure many more will follow us once they see what is happening,” nodded Aglithia.

“If they see an organized, armed resistance, there is no doubt the other tribes will come out of hiding and help too. They may not be fighters, but they are not helpless. They wouldn’t have survived the Tyrant’s reign otherwise.”

Next to her, Naptunie nodded firmly, also agreeing to this. In fact, Cessilia, Tessandra, and Ashen thought just the same.

They had seen for themselves, many times, that the Eastern Kingdom’s tribes were resilient. Although there would definitely be trouble and damage within the Inner Capital, they had to hope everyone would be able to defend themselves, at the very least.

“We estimate the Yekara troops to be a thousand people,” suddenly said Aglithia.

“...A th-thousand?” groaned Cessilia.

“Yes. At least, within the Capital. We suspect they might have more forces prepared outside of the Capital, and hired a lot more people using the Pangoja’s money. We’re talking about mercenaries, bandits, and hired fighters.”

“That’s going to be a fun bunch to punch!” exclaimed Darsan, getting excited all by himself.

“More like a lot of trouble,” groaned Kassian. “That means we will have enemies coming from all sides and without

much order. Even if the dragons manage to keep their external reinforcements out, their goal will be to make the fight last until they kill Ashen.”

All eyes went to the white-haired king. His dark eyes were still riveted on the map, but he straightened with a smirk on his lips.

“They can try,” he said. “It won’t be the first time they’ve tried to get rid of me, and I’m not willing to let them win.”

“...I’m sorry to report, your... adopted brother survived,” muttered Aglithia. “He’s wounded, but some of our spies confirmed they saw him getting geared up for battle.”

“He’s mine,” immediately growled Ashen. “Let me fight him.”

In fact, Cessilia was more than happy to let him do so. Ashen’s state was, at the very least, probably as bad as his brother. She would have said something against it if she hadn’t seen that adopted brother of his crushed partially by an enormous rock. Even if he had survived, she doubted the man was back to his full capacity.

“...What about th-that woman, Jisel?” she asked Aglithia.

“No sign of her,” she shook her head, “but that can’t be good...”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a glance across the table, her cousin grimacing. Cessilia hesitated. ...Should she

have gotten rid of that woman when she had the chance, or left her to die? Somehow, she couldn’t, and Cessilia knew she

would have made the same choice over again. A part of her just couldn’t bring herself to fully hate Jisel. Perhaps it was this

sense of commonality, the strange bond of blood they shared. Perhaps it was because she found that woman pitiful, or her ever

so unclear intentions. Either way, she just couldn’t make up her mind yet.

“...We will see if sh-she appears,” she declared. “Perhaps she f-fled already.”

This might have been hopeful on her part, but Cessilia wished for Jisel to disappear and never come back again. She

had a feeling things wouldn’t be that simple though...

“Alright...” said Tessandra. “We have a plan, and everyone knows what they have to do.

Shall we get going before my

boyfriend really gets his head chopped off? It’s my first relationship and I do not want it to end in a shitty tragedy.”

“Calm down, Tessa,” scoffed Darsan, putting his fists on his hips. “We’re going to rescue that boy of yours, alright. The

lad doesn’t even know what he’s signing up for, maybe he’s better off dead, haha!”

All eyes went to him, no one finding this very funny. Even Cessilia was glaring at her brother’s cruel lack of delicacy,

but the one pair of eyes that seemed to melt his grin away was Nana’s. Then,

Tessandra chuckled and bumped her elbow into his arm.

“By the way, Darsan. My boyfriend you’ve been making fun of just happens to be Naptunie’s dear older brother. Just so you know.”

His expression fell, replaced by sheer panic as he slowly realized his mistake. Cessilia realized, no one had referred to

Sab as Nana’s older brother until now... She sighed. At least Darsan would take things a whole lot more seriously now. Ashen suddenly grabbed her hand, gently.

“Let’s get going,” he said. “Cessilia, Tessandra, and I will attack at the main plaza first to rescue the hostages, then we will part ways to reconquer the castle.”

“I’ll make sure to stay as mobile as possible,” nodded Kassian.

“I will be with you,” Lady Bastat suddenly announced. “This way, we can rally more people as we move through the streets.”

Kassian’s green eyes went to her with a hesitation.

“...Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Slowly, she took out a long, strange little rope that had been tied around her waist all this time. She removed the gorgeous ornament that was hanging at one end for all to see the dangerous, pointy blade it had been hiding all along, and she smiled back at him.

“It’s just like we said. We may not be fighters, but we are not defenseless. I will manage. I also have a score to settle for my father’s murder.”

A faint smile appeared on Kassian’s lips, and he nodded.

“Let’s go,” said Cessilia.

## Chapter 25

They agreed to split up right outside Bastat’s house, as Darsan had to go to Krai to give instructions and post the large

Black Dragon at the agreed upon door, while Lady Bastat and Kassian were going to have Kian drop them in the lower part of

the Capital, away from the castle and the Central Plaza, to gather as much attention as possible and have the Yekara head to them first.

Kassian smiled softly and came to hug his sister gently.

“Take care of yourself, alright? ...You too, Tessa.”

“You know me,” she said with a wink.

Kassian nodded, and turned his green eyes to his sister. They exchanged a long, intimate glance, then he quickly kissed

her head, his fingers caressing her curls. Cessilia smiled, hugging her big brother back.

Kassian had always been the protective

kind, but he had been even more so after what had happened to her. He glanced at Ashen over her shoulder, the King staying

expressionless, although he was obviously waiting to grab Cessilia's hand back the second he could. Kassian chuckled, and took a step back, parting with his sister.

"If anything happens to my sister..."

"It won't."

The two men exchanged a long stare, although far less tense than before. Cessilia smiled, and when Ashen took her hand, she held on tight.

Meanwhile, Darsan was fidgeting next to Naptunie, shifting his weight from one leg to another with an awkward expression.

"So, uh... You... You have to be careful, alright?"

"I will!" exclaimed Naptunie, decided.

Darsan nodded, although not convinced.

"I'm going to beat a lot of those brutes, alright? I promise none of them will be taking a step inside the Inner Capital!"

"We will be counting on you!"

Naptunie's smile was so blinding and yet she was completely oblivious to Darsan's feelings. He stared at her for a few seconds, hesitating, and suddenly grabbed her hands, making her gasp in surprise, her eyes opened wide on their joined hands.

"I'm going to show you, Nana! How great of a husband I will be!"

"U-uh... I see... I mean... A-alright?"

He then nodded, visibly satisfied, and turned around, proudly walking away toward the gates. Kassian chuckled, amused by his brother's antics, and turned around too, followed closely behind by Lady Bastat. Meanwhile, Naptunie stood there for a few more seconds, completely shaken up, her hands even still hanging mid-air. Cessilia chuckled, and both she and Tessandra stepped next to their confused friend.

"...Say..." Nana muttered, "by any chance, does... does Sir Darsan...?"

"Love you?" chuckled Tessandra. "Yeah, big time. I'm pretty sure he fell pretty hard for your charms."

"What?!"

She screamed and turned to them, her face surprisingly red.

"N-n-no way!"

"Yes way," sighed Tessandra, pulling her in the right direction. "He's been pretty obvious too, Nana. It's amazing you're the only one who hasn't noticed until now."

"But he's... he's a prince!"

"Literally no one cares," laughed Tessandra. "Plus, Darsan probably destroyed pretty much anything he might have inherited. He is a prince in name alone, Nana, don't freak out about that. If you're worried, worry about being proposed to by a walking natural disaster."

"Proposed to?!"



Cessilia chuckled, but they didn't have time to answer poor Naptunie's interrogations right now. The rest of their group, including Ashen, rushed to the secret passage again, following Aglithia. While Tessandra happily kept teasing Nana on the way, they still made a point to rush behind the Cheshi guiding them. The tunnel was too narrow for them to properly run, so they were walking very quickly instead, rushing to the other side. They had only a few minutes left, and they would have to match their timing with the dragons' attacks on the other side of the Inner Capital. Cessilia even suspected Tessandra kept chatting with Naptunie as a way to distract both of them from the urgency of the situation. She and Ashen were at the back, not saying a word all this time, but they had their hands firmly locked together, and neither of them had any intention to let go, even as they had to walk one behind the other in the more narrow sections of the tunnel. Cessilia could feel the tension in Ashen's fingers, and she could understand that. Only a few hours had passed since he had fought with his adopted brother and his ex-mistress had stabbed him. She swallowed her saliva, a feeling of guilt coming forth.

"...About th-that woman..."

"I don't regret anything," he immediately retorted. "I apologized to her, but I am not sorry for choosing you. She knew my heart would never be hers, and she was using me as much as I was using her. Her anger comes from another place, even if I might have fueled it some more."

"I know," suddenly answered Cessilia. "I'm not mad at you, b-but I don't regret letting her go this one t-time. But if she g-gets in our way again, I won't be so k-kind."

"...I understand."

They exchanged a faint smile, and Ashen gently tightened his grasp around her hand. Staring back into his dark eyes, Cessilia felt like something had definitely changed in him. Perhaps since he and Kassian had sorted out the truth about why he had been really forced to leave the Dragon Empire, Ashen seemed... happier, lighter. The way he looked at her too. It was a bit... different. There was something more serene but also, more... bittersweet about it. "...What is it?"

"I'm happy like this. I know we're about to run into battle, but... I've felt more free in the past eight hours, hiding from the world and staying with you, than I've been in a long time. I feel like I've found something I had lost. I don't know how to describe it, but after I spoke with Kassian, I felt like something finally got... fixed inside. Before that, I was always... angry, unsure, and even madder at myself for constantly doubting everything. I felt like I had to repeatedly toughen myself up to

survive, and bury my emotions inside, negative or positive. Now... I feel like I can finally be myself, thanks to you being here. I

don't care anymore about being the King. Actually, no, for the first time, I truly feel like the King of this Kingdom. I feel like

this is my place, and I am ready to defend it. I finally know why I'll be fighting."

Cessilia smiled.

She was glad, but deep inside, she felt a little part of her was disappointed too.

Disappointed in herself. When she had

come here, she had found a broken Ashen, a man who was nothing more than the dark, angry shadow of the boy she had once

met. Now, she could tell this Ashen she was holding hands with was the one she had been yearning for all along. The true

partner she needed, a man who could stand tall and strong, bold, and not hide his intentions anymore. He wouldn't have to

submit to the willfulness of the Lords, or act so cold all the time. He had truly grown, in such a short time.

Meanwhile, she...

"Lady Naptunie," suddenly said Aglithia, climbing up the stairs off the tunnel. "This is the starting point of all of our

tunnels. If you're not coming with us to fight at the plaza, you should take a different tunnel, and head to the port as fast as

possible. Ask my people, they will show you which one to take. If you can signal us when the Yekara spot the Silver Dragon,

we will know when to strike at the Central Plaza."

"I will! I can grab what I need at my auntie's place, and climb on the roof of her house.

It's not raining too much, so you

should be able to see the fire from very far!"

"Find a place to stay hidden as soon as you're done, Nana," said Tessandra. "Alright?

We won't be able to save you if

something happens, so make sure no one notices you."

"What? But I want to be useful! I even put on these heavy protections! I should be able to help like Lady Bastat!"

"You're no fighter, Nana, you know that!"

"J-just make sure you s-stay out of harm's way," said Cessilia. "S-stay with your family, but we will fetch you when we c-can."

Naptunie nodded, but she didn't seem too happy about this. Cessilia could understand.

Although she didn't have any

fighting abilities other than her knowledge, this was about saving her older brother's life.

Plus, Naptunie had been brave

enough to stay by their side all this time, and had grown a lot in the process too.

"Nana, you need to t-talk to the Dorosef Tribe for us," Cessilia added. "They are the b-biggest tribe of all, if you c-can

get them to help us out, p-perhaps we can spare many lives during the upcoming fight."

Naptunie's eyes lit up again, and she immediately nodded, clearly very happy.

"I will!"

“Good, because this is where we split,” announced Aglithia, who had just stepped out of the tunnel first, into the Cheshi residence.

She extended her hand to help Tessandra and then Naptunie climb up, and turned around, showing Naptunie a corridor.

“If you continue this way and get to the blue door with a white marking on it, two of the triplets should be ready inside.

They will show you how to take the tunnel, and accompany you too; once you’re inside that tunnel, you’ll find stairs that go up

and lead into a sea-level cave. It’s a smaller tunnel, but luckily, so are you! As soon as you get out of the cave, you’ll find manmade

stairs to climb up, which leads to one side of the port. It’s invisible to most people, but you’ll end up right behind the

docks! You can ask one of them to come to us once you’re safe or if you need to message us.”

“I’ll be fine!” exclaimed Naptunie, still visibly upset about being sent away from the fight.

“...Cessi, Tessa, you make

sure to save my brother, and the others, please? And stay safe!”

“We will, Nana, don’t worry.”

To her surprise, both of the cousins suddenly grabbed Naptunie to hug her, making some noise with their armor. Still,

Naptunie smiled, prouder than ever.

“I’ll do my best!” she exclaimed, surprisingly clenching her fists just like Darsan before.

Then, she turned around and ran. Tessandra chuckled.

“You know... It didn’t hit me until now, but maybe she would be a good pair with that meathead Darsan, after all.”

“Of c-course she would,” smiled Cessilia, before turning to Aglithia.

“Let’s go.”

Aglithia nodded and guided them, once again, through the Cheshi residence. It was a very brief walk, just two corridors

away. They arrived in a large open space, an indoor garden filled with people. As soon as they entered, everyone present, men

and women, put a knee down in one spectacularly synchronized motion.

“The Cheshi Clan greets the White King! We greet the Imperial Dragon Princesses!”

Tessandra grimaced, very uneasy about the title referring to her as well. Meanwhile, Cessilia nodded, and Ashen turned

to Aglithia.

“That’s everyone?”

“Half of them,” she said. “The others are already going to the south to help out Prince Kassian and Lady Bastat, and

another group is currently watching the area around the Central Plaza. Even those here will know to split up in several

directions to take control of all the streets.”

“It won’t be an easy fight.”

To their surprise, Aglithia’s father appeared behind them, wearing full battle gear as well. His outfit was surprisingly

similar to those of his men, who wore very simple dark garbs, with reinforced leather protections and pieces of armor. Some wore colored chevrons, probably sub-leaders meant to lead their groups. Aglithia's father only wore more dark steel, and large shoulder protections that made him look taller, especially with those two swords at his flanks. The man glanced at Ashen, his eyes going up and down on his figure, and very faintly, he bowed to him and Cessilia, who were still holding hands and standing next to each other.

"...My King," he said.

"So now you'll admit it," scoffed Ashen.

"We have made some urgent decisions."

Cessilia softly pulled on Ashen's arm, a bit annoyed with his sudden show of pride. She knew he had bad blood with

the Cheshi, but they really didn't have time for that now. He sighed, but looked away, visibly withholding his disagreement

with the Cheshi Leader. They could always solve the issues between them at a later time, and from the way Aglithia's father

was staring at the King, Cessilia thought they had a lot to discuss indeed...

"...We are ready to go any time," he finally said.

Cessilia nodded.

"The sooner the b-better."

"Then let's get going now."

They turned around, following Aglithia who was leading them to another of their secret passages. This time, they had

about a hundred men following right behind them, although the large group strangely made close to no sound at all. Tessandra

glanced at the floor beneath them, but their light step technique was just impressive.

Some of them even climbed up the roof,

using a different, more aerial way to get to the plaza before them.

While Aglithia was running ahead, her father was right behind Ashen and Cessilia, side by side with Tessandra, and all

the other Cheshi fighters behind them. This time, the tunnel they were using, hidden under what seemed to be a fake tombstone,

was actually large enough that two or three people could stand side by side, and for everyone to run, which they all did.

"Aglithia will stay with you while I lead the men within the Capital," explained the Cheshi Clan Leader. "They all will

know what to do and whom to fight, and half of our leaders were already told to stick with you no matter what, so all our

troops won't be scattered away from you; plenty of them will stick by your side to help when you get inside the castle,

notably." As Cessilia nodded, the man suddenly stepped to the side where the tunnel split in two. He swiftly disappeared down

the branch, with the men behind them knowing exactly whom to follow. Cessilia felt her heartbeat quicken. This time, they

were heading to the real battle. Only a few minutes had passed since they had left Bastat's house, but now, everything was accelerating. She hoped Naptunie would be fine, far from the main battle.

Ashen gently held her hand once more.

"...Ready?" he muttered.

Cessilia nodded.

Suddenly, in front of them, Aglithia stopped, gesturing for all of them to stop as well.

They all froze, and she climbed

the stairs first to judge the situation. Then, she gestured for them to follow, Tessandra running ahead to see where they had

arrived. The inside of the building looked like an abandoned restaurant or hostel. The

furniture had been carefully piled up

against the windows, as if to create a barricade. They all ran to see what was going on outside the windows.

The Cheshi hadn't lied. They were literally steps away from the plaza. In fact, they were so close that they felt like they

were part of the crowd in the streets around the building, who were loudly protesting.

"Fuck, Sab..."

Hearing her cousin's cry, Cessilia's heart dropped for a second, but she quickly found Sabael. He was alive, but lined

up with other people on a little platform. He had been badly beaten, and was barely recognizable, with his tumefied face, the

blood all over his body and his ripped up clothes.

"I can't believe they left him half-fucking-naked out there!"

Cessilia sighed. Sabael wasn't the only one in bad shape. There were at least twenty people lined up, their hands hung

above their heads, and all looked to be gravely injured. Some even seemed to have passed out, or had terrible injuries

exposed. No wonder the crowd was protesting so loudly despite the threat of the Yekara soldiers.

There were a lot, indeed. Not only the Yekara and their red uniforms, but those mercenaries Aglithia had mentioned,

carrying large weapons and intimidating the crowd, visibly looking for the first opportunity to spill blood. Cessilia glanced

around, but she didn't recognize the Yekara lieutenant who was on the platform, speaking out loud. She couldn't hear well from

inside the building, but he was apparently listing some wrongs for which the captives were about to be killed. He was pacing

around on the platform, reading some paper out loud, and ignoring the crowd that kept swearing and insulting him. There was a

wide space of about four feet between the platform and the Yekara soldiers that were keeping the crowd at bay, but the tension

was rising. No one was willing to see their relatives or friends die, but from what Cessilia could see, they had no weapons to

fight the Yekara. She even recognized some of the Dorosef people angrily holding their cooking utensils, as if ready to fight

with spatulas, skewers, and pans if needed. They weren't the only ones. After the last few days spent in the Kingdom, Cessilia could recognize faces from almost each tribe in the crowd, or from their attire or hairstyles. Although it was mildly dangerous, the number of people in that crowd was already impressive enough. It was as if all of the tribes had gathered there to protest.

"Any minute now," groaned Tessandra, impatient. "What the fuck are we waiting for?!" Cessilia glanced back, but indeed, the last Cheshi had come out of the tunnels, and everyone was taking their weapons out, ready to fight.

"The signal," she muttered with a smile. "Any second now..."

Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a quick glance and separated their hands, each grabbing their weapons of choice. For Ashen, a long, heavy, and beautifully designed sword similar to the one Darsan had picked, and for Cessilia, a pair of twin blades, sharp and light, and a small dagger. They smiled at each other, ready.

"Don't go too far," he said.

"I won't."

Suddenly, they heard the signal, loud and clear like a battle cry.

A dragon's powerful growl in the distance.

Everyone in the room tensed up. Cessilia, Tessandra, and Aglithia all raised an arm, keeping everyone silent and steady behind them. It was too soon for them to come up, this was just the beginning. From the cry, the Dragon girls knew that was Kian the Silver Dragon, probably revealing its presence to their enemies. Not only was that growl loud and echoing but the dragon's silver streak in the dark sky ought to have been impressive and attention-catching in itself.

They watched the reaction in the Central Plaza, the crowd immediately turning their heads to see where the loud growl had come from. Many immediately spotted the dragon, pointing up at the sky. People screamed, but some almost sounded like they were loudly cheering the appearance of another legendary creature. The members of the Dorosef and Sehsan Tribes that were present looked ecstatic as they already knew about Krai, and the presence of another dragon could only mean the Princess had received reinforcements. As expected, the Yekara were not among those who rejoiced. From where she stood, Cessilia very clearly saw the face of the man who was standing on the execution deck sink, his jaw dropping. Right after that, he began shouting orders, angrily pointing at the sky, spitting words to his men on the ground. Tessandra smiled next to her; their plan was working. In just minutes, half of the Yekara soldiers present on the plaza moved to the Inner Wall, their eyes regularly checking the sky above. Because they were on the same level as the crowd, it was hard to see exactly how many soldiers

remained. They could see at least two dozen of them still blocking the crowd from approaching the platform. With the prospect of a dragon coming to their rescue and so many soldiers leaving, the whole area grew louder. The locals became even more vehement in their protests and were trying to break through the line of soldiers, not hesitating to try and shove them.

Cessilia was growing nervous, waiting for Nana's signal. Was she in her designated spot yet? She hoped the young woman wouldn't run into any trouble, and found herself glad she had two of the triplets by her friend's side...

Gently, Ashen suddenly touched her hand. Cessilia turned to him, and he gave her a confident nod.

"...It's going to be alright," he muttered.

"...I know."

Cessilia was most nervous for him. Despite him hiding it well, the King was still heavily injured. What her brother's blood had done probably wasn't enough to completely heal an injury of that size. Ashen should have had a few days to rest, not head into another battle the next morning... Cessilia held on even more tightly to the handle of her sword, determined. Now, she couldn't afford to hesitate again. Lives were at stake, and her enemies were clear. She didn't have to stop herself from killing or withhold her attacks. The Yekara were soldiers and traitors. This was a real war, not a simple duel between two young women. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she glanced to the side. Tessandra's eyes were fixated on Sabael, her dark eyes so piercing it was as if she was trying to dig a hole in the platform under his feet. How far away were they? How long could it take? Perhaps two minutes? However, those would be long minutes cutting through the crowd from here to there...

Anytime now... The tension in the room was getting heavier with each passing second. Since the crowd had spotted

Kian, the dragons had probably already landed at the bridges, ready to begin guarding their own, meaning that Naptunie was the one to signal when the fights would start...

Suddenly, they heard it. A large explosion, followed by a sudden blue flash in the sky.

Although everyone had been

prepared to run, they couldn't help but glance back to see how the hell such a thing had been done. From the flash, only a large

blue fire could now be seen in the distance, already quieting down under the rain.

"Go!" shouted Aglithia.

Their troops poured into the streets, Cessilia and her friends first. She and Tessandra both ran into the first trio of

Yekara soldiers, who didn't even get a second to understand what was happening before simultaneously getting transpierced by

the two women's blades. Their eyes still wide open in shock, they slid off the blades and fell aside, Tessandra and Cessilia already running past them.

It was total chaos in the street. The sudden arrival of dozens of fighters had thrown the Yekara into a complete disarray.

Not only that, but the techniques of the Cheshi, who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, from the sky or a blind spot, weren't giving them any time to regroup either. Even the townsfolk were surprised and trying to get out of the way, the most combative ones still pushing to access the guarded platform.

Cessilia, Tessandra, and Ashen were unstoppable. Unlike the Cheshi who launched sudden and swift attacks, they were progressing in the open, restlessly slaying anyone in their way. Because they were the easiest to spot and attack on the way to the platform, the Yekara kept aiming at them first, thinking they'd be the first ones to stop. They were incredibly wrong. The pair of cousins were such a perfect match, covering each other's backs and synchronizing their attacks, that it looked like they were progressing with minimal effort. To those not fighting, it was a dance they wanted to stay away from and yet, quite amazing to look at. Despite the dark skies, their armor was shining brightly through the crowd, and those who recognized what they were actually made of grew even more admiring. The crowd that wasn't fighting was cheering for the duo of women fighting through the crowd, getting out of the way for them to make progress.

It was still quite a dense crowd. What had only seemed like a couple minutes' journey earlier was now turning into an awful amount of fighting and pushing through. The Yekara soldiers seemed to have received orders at some point, seeing as they thickened their ranks with reinforcements, their numbers growing larger and blocking the duo's way.

Right behind them, the King was making as much of an impression. From what they could hear, the Yekara's lies about his death had reached a lot of the inhabitants, and many of those present were celebrating their King's return. While some had figured out the lie, others were happily rejoicing about their King coming back from the underworld for the second time. No one could tell which version would make it into history...

"Somebody get to that damn platform!" Tessandra shouted between two sword swings. Cessilia glanced ahead. The situation was urgent. The Yekara soldiers were only good at slowing them down, but that might actually make them lose the time they needed to rescue Sabael and the others. They were still entirely too far, and even the Cheshi that were trying to get to the platform were stopped. In fact, the Central Plaza was vast, and there were no buildings



around that they could jump from. Everyone had to get there by foot, and the crowd was like an army between them and the platform. With horror, they saw the man on the platform gesture to hurry and start the executions. The two cousins exchanged a glance. They didn't have time to deal with the small fry.

"Cessi, help me!"

Cessilia nodded, and suddenly ran ahead, while her cousin went back, making everyone around completely confused.

While Cessilia was left to battle alone, her cousin took several steps back, before turning around, and placing her weapons back in her belt. What was she preparing? While everyone was still confused, she began running straight at Cessilia as if she was about to fight her. The speed of her run was impressive, though, enough that people actually ran to get out of the way, fearing the cannonball. However, Tessandra was aiming at her cousin alone, and, to everyone's surprise, Cessilia suddenly grabbed a random Yekara soldier among many, and used her sword at record speed. In the blink of an eye, the man was defeated on the ground, while Cessilia was holding his chest plate in her hands. Her cousin was still running at a terrifying speed toward her, but Cessilia defeated another man using that plate like a hammer, and let him fall on top of the previous man.

She then stepped on both of them, and squatted down, holding the plate above her head. People understood what was going to happen one second before it actually did. Tessandra reached her, and leapt in the air; she landed on the plate for less than a second, when Cessilia, with a loud grunt, used her whole body to project it higher, giving her cousin an incredible jump base.

Tessandra jumped, and for a few seconds, it seemed almost as if she was flying above the crowd; her figure was

absolutely perfect, her eyes riveted on the platform. She made a perfect arc before landing brutally, rolling on the floor and getting back up, her swords already out. What happened next was like a tornado unchained, blood flying on the closest bystanders, even the Yekara soldiers who just had the time to turn around and realize they were already too late. Tessandra's twin swords were flying around, cutting throats and freeing their allies from their ropes. The platform had become an execution stage indeed, but not the one intended. Everyone was watching the massacre with a mix of awe and fear. Tessandra was like a goddess of wrath on a wild rampage. Strangely, though, she had left one man tied, while the other hostages had been let free and had run off the platform already. He was watching her do her little show, a wry smile on his lips. When it was only the two of them left on the platform, for a brief moment before more Yekara soldiers came up, did she turn to him, out of breath but a

fierce smile stuck on her face.

"Hey there, handsome," she chuckled. "Miss me much?"

"I was wondering why you left me tied," sighed Sabael. "Should I be worried that you're enjoying this position a bit too much?"

Tessandra bit her lower lip, looking him up and down. He was held with his wrists tied above his head, and his feet barely touching the floor. She chuckled and glanced down, her eyes stopping on his exposed abs, her fingers softly touching them and making him shiver.

"...Hm, maybe," she said, "but I do not like seeing you all injured, handsome."

"It's not like I gave them permission to," he sighed.

"I know," said Tessandra, caressing his cheek. "...Only I get to kick your ass."

She finally cut down the rope holding him with a smug smile but, to her surprise, Sabael suddenly pulled her into a

passionate kiss. In the crowd, Cessilia, who had lifted her eyes, catching a break and to see how the situation was on the

platform, happened to witness that moment, and chuckled, surprised by Sabael's boldness. She hoped Naptunie was

somewhere she could also witness this...

Back on the platform, Tessandra was so shocked she had almost dropped her swords, only holding her arms apart so

she wouldn't mistakenly stab her lover. When Sabael ended their kiss, she stood there, a bit speechless.

"...What was that?" she blushed uncontrollably, trying to stay cool still.

"I really missed you," he sighed.

Tessandra cleared her throat, trying to hide her embarrassment, and suddenly remembered to lower her arms.

"I may have missed you too... You're not too embarrassed to be rescued by a lady?"

"Not really. That will be a cool story to tell our kids later."

He smiled and grabbed a sword abandoned on the platform, quickly stretching his shoulders that were most likely sore

before beginning to fight off the soldiers that were climbing up to stop them. Meanwhile, Tessandra was left behind, still

processing what he had just said.

"Kids?!" she exclaimed. "Our kids, you said?!"

She rejoined the fight excitedly by his side, the two of them pretty much unstoppable.

They completely dominated the platform, despite the Yekara's attempts to reconquer it.

On the ground, a few steps away, Cessilia had also made great progress, Ashen replacing Tessandra by her side in the

pit. She caught sight of her cousin joyfully fighting beside her lover. They had managed to rescue everyone there, but that was

only the first part of the plan.

Just as she thought so, another flash blinded everyone, a red one this time. The fighting had begun on the other side, in

the area where Kassian and Lady Bastat were supposed to stand together. How many Yekara were they possibly facing? It was impossible to know. Now that they were in the open, Cessilia was actually able to turn her head and spot Naptunie, standing on a roof with a gigantic fire by her side. She wasn't alone, it seemed, with three smaller silhouettes by her side. Two of the triplets and another ally? She looked safe and sound for now, but now, her position was known to everyone. Next to Cessilia, several Yekara shouted to grab her, their fingers pointing toward the roof where the bright red fire was slowly dying. Cessilia chopped off one of the arms close to her, the limb falling at her feet with the finger still extended. While her victim cried, she glanced in Naptunie's direction again. Luckily, her friend was already gone, evidently aware of the danger.

"We need to get to the castle!" suddenly declared Ashen by her side.

Cessilia nodded, glancing beyond the platform; they were still many streets away from the castle, but it wasn't

undoable. In fact, if most of the fight happened here, it won't be long until they can reconquer the castle.

Moreover, the landscape was changing around them. From just a few protesters, the streets were now getting crowded

with angry citizens, each wanting to give a piece of their mind to the Yekara people.

Some were only shouting, but many had

found whatever weapons they could, and were fearlessly threatening to use pans and pitchforks against the soldiers. Still, they

couldn't do much fighting against trained and experienced warriors. Cessilia was worried the mob would get hurt if things got

out of hand. Not only that, but despite their efforts, the number of enemies just kept rising as they continued to get more support

coming. It was as if soldiers in red poured out of everywhere; soon, she understood why. Some of those people wore the attire

of Yekaras, but they were clearly mercenaries until not too long ago. They didn't show the discipline to follow orders, and

were trying to intimidate the crowd with violence. They didn't work well in groups either, thus they were quickly isolated by

the angry crowd, provoking little fights left and right in the streets.

It looked like the Central Plaza was the epicenter of a situation that was gradually getting worse in the streets. Anger

was rising, and the citizens, fueled by the return of their King, were visibly at a breaking point in their patience toward the

despicable actions of the Yekara. Cessilia could hear their complaints about their houses being searched and, for a lot of them,

robbed by their aggressors. Those people were no fighters, but that morning, they were getting confidence from the global

movement of protests occurring everywhere. In fact, angry shouting and protests could be heard coming from all directions,

people loudly expressing their anger and shoving the soldiers in red if they were brave enough to. Cessilia was as impressed as she was scared; people were gathering in protest without them even having to do anything, the word of mouth already waking up every house, all families ready to fight back. If the Yekara had taken the streets overnight, their dominion was now being pushed back, people urging them to get out of their streets, insulting them and ganging up against them when the strength was lacking.

Although, this surely wouldn't be enough. The main leaders weren't there, but Cessilia could see their troops already preparing. She doubted they had put their main forces in the streets when they were expecting them to come and fight back.

Ashen was right; they had to head to the castle to end this as soon as possible. Luckily, Sabael and Tessandra were gathering a lot of attention on the platform, and the soldiers were now splitting up to fight the two couples, making it easier for Cessilia and Ashen to take the way around to the castle while Tessandra and Sabael kept them busy there.

"Tessa, you have to guide the people in the s-streets!" Cessilia shouted.

"Just go!" retorted her cousin, grunting. "I'll let you know if the situation gets shitty here!" She then grabbed Sabael's hand, urging him to jump off the platform, before she suddenly turned around and exhaled a fireball, not the biggest one, but enough to aggressively set the wooden deck on fire, and the men still on it.

Cessilia nodded, and with Ashen, began running toward the castle. Aglithia was appearing next to her from time to time, jumping out of what seemed like nowhere to mercilessly murder a soldier, before disappearing again. Her technique was impressive, but it didn't allow for grouped attacks. The Cheshi were supporting them the best they could, but then, Cessilia realized, there was a lot more going on. More fighters appeared, all dressed in black, swiftly jumping on the Cheshi,

assassinating the fighters just as quickly as the Cheshi murdered the Yekara. She suddenly got into close contact with one of the masked assassins, too quick for Cessilia to push them back, when Ashen jumped in front, blocking the attack with his large sword. He brutally kicked the aggressor in the chest, and pinned him down to the ground, ripping their mask off. Like the Cheshi, they had distinctive traits, strange black stripes tattooed on their faces.

"Those damn Kunu," growled Ashen.

"We will have our revenge!" shouted the man under his sword, spitting a mouthful of blood on his last words.

"...You wish."

He twisted his sword, finishing his opponent, and looked around, spotting the flying fighters with a sullen expression.

"We don't have time to lose with them," he hissed.

"Let us deal with them!" said Aglithia, suddenly appearing by their side. "The Kunu have been our rivals for a while,

we should be the ones to deal with them. Just go, Your Majesties!"

Cessilia and Ashen nodded and ran ahead, only getting rid of those who stood in their way or tried to attack from

above. The Central Plaza had turned into a full-on battlefield, with the large fire pit started by Tessandra in the middle. Not

many would be able to follow them into the castle, indicating a hard fight ahead. Still, neither of them slowed down until they reached the first doors to the entrance of it.

Suddenly, a loud growl was heard, and they lifted their heads. Its body circled up around the castle's main tower, claws

digging into its stonewalls, Jinn the Red Dragon was glaring at them.

"...You should have finished them off," hissed Ashen, glaring at the dragon.

Cessilia thought otherwise, but she was still shocked at the dragon's angry attitude; Jinn was clearly threatening them. It

might have been the first foreign dragon she met, but Cessilia was still experienced enough to understand the meaning of a

dragon's growl. This was clearly an angry, menacing one. It wasn't close enough to actually attack unless it came down, but the

Red Dragon was visibly bent on guarding this place. If Jinn was there, did that mean Jisel was in the castle as well? Cessilia

didn't like that woman, but she didn't want to hold on to her resentment toward her either. The Yekara and Ashen's adopted

brother were their target, and they had already ditched her, so what was that woman possibly doing in there? Why had she

returned? Cessilia had once felt pity toward Jisel's circumstances; it was that of many women before her. Still, if she wanted to

survive this, Jisel should have left with her dragon when she had the chance to. Cessilia and her brothers had spared her once;

they weren't so nice as to do it twice.

There was no one guarding the first gate, but Cessilia and Ashen ran into trouble as soon as the castle door was in sight.

A dozen new Yekara soldiers were lined up there guarding the entrance, clearly waiting for them, spears and swords ready.

"Will you b-be alright?"

"I'm just getting started."

Cessilia smiled faintly. Ashen looked completely fine indeed and, from seeing the way he fought with superb moves, no

one would have known he had been severely wounded just the night before. Side by side, a handful of Cheshi fighters behind

them, they fearlessly cut through the lines of Yekara and traitorous Royal Guards trying to stop them. Despite the numbers, the

difference in strength was massive. Ashen's sword could cut three men's waists in a single swing, violently cutting down

anyone who stood in his way. A few steps away from him, Cessilia was less messy, but perhaps even more efficient. Her movements were incredibly quick, precise, and deadly. Bodies fell beneath her with minimal amounts of blood shed, most of the time with only a vital point sliced open, or fatal injuries that left them seconds to live. In just minutes, the two of them cleared their way through the gate with impressive ease, the Cheshi behind them having provided minimal support. They finally stopped moving, all their opponents dead or almost, and exchanged a glance, out of breath.

“...Ladies first,” said Ashen.

He was a bit more exhausted than she was, his torso heaving up and down under his armor. Cessilia was glad the one she had picked was perfectly protecting his injury, but also helping his posture. Whoever had crafted this truly knew the needs of a dragon warrior.

She stepped ahead, and kicked the door open for the two of them, her weapons at the ready for the next fight. Luckily, there were less soldiers guarding the entrance of the castle; the room being too large and circular had probably convinced them there was no point in defending such a vast area. Moreover, from there on, the castle was going to be divided in narrow corridors, enclosed spaces, and a handful of large rooms. There would be more than enough places more efficient than there to put a defense up. In fact, Ashen and Cessilia left the Cheshi fighters that had come with them to deal with those, while they were still catching a break, glancing around.

“...Chances are those rotten bastards are hiding in the throne room or the banquet hall,” he said.

“They will t-try to keep us from k-killing your adopted brother,” nodded Cessilia.

“They can try. I can’t wait to get rid of that wretched bastard once and for all, if he really is alive...”

That was what they had heard so far. Cessilia herself was surprised, if that was true.

From what she had seen, his body had been crushed by rocks. Perhaps he had survived, but he ought to have lost a limb or two, at the very least... She couldn’t understand why the Yekara Clan Leader was holding on to that man instead of taking the throne for himself. He could have simply taken over, declaring he had been named by their fake, very brief King to take his succession. Or was it that he doubted he would be recognized as a legitimate leader? It turned out Ashen’s brother wasn’t much more welcomed by the people, though... No one was blind as to who was truly behind all this.

“Cessilia.”

Ashen gently called her name, and extended his free hand for her to take. Together, they climbed the stairs first, trusting

the Cheshi would catch up with them, or spread out in the castle to get rid of more Yekara soldiers. This was more their kind of battleground, after all. Unlike the plaza from earlier where they had been completely exposed, this time they could execute lightspeed attacks and disappear right after.

While climbing up, Cessilia tried to catch sight of what was going on outside through the windows. Not only in the Central Plaza, which she could spot in a blink, but also farther away, where her brothers and the dragons stood. She could see more fights going on, and Kian's shiny figure defending one of the bridges. It was harder to figure out the situation on the other one, but Darsan seemed to be doing fine, standing in the middle of the bridge, the bright orange armor shining through while dozens of little silhouettes were regularly thrown off to fall into the river below. She couldn't see Kassian's situation, as her brother's location was caught between all the buildings, but she could guess. It was probably like everywhere else, dozens of citizens flocking the streets to fight back with them, and Lady Bastat's tribe gathering at his side. So much had happened during such a short amount of time; Cessilia could only hope the losses on their side would be minimal. She could also see more people gathering outside the Outer Wall, hundreds of little dots moving toward the doors. Who knew how long the bridges could be defended before people managed to force their way in...?

It wasn't as if Ashen and herself weren't busy as well. Cessilia was astounded with how many people got in their way. How long had the Yekara been preparing this? How many people had they corrupted to make the castle so guarded? At each new corridor, there was another fight. Ashen's castle had suddenly turned into a maze that was not welcoming them back. Not only that, but Cessilia realized there had been a lot more fights than she had thought after they had fled the cave; there were signs of battle almost everywhere. They even ran into some Royal Guards' bodies abandoned here and there, most likely those who had tried to resist.

Ashen's anger gradually rose as he saw more and more of them. When they pushed the door to another room, finding three more bodies and a lot of blood spilled everywhere, the furniture wrecked, the floor and walls covered in blood, his piercing black eyes stayed on the bodies.

"If only I had gotten rid of the Yekara earlier... I should have known they wouldn't be satisfied with a seat and a title.

All my guards..."

"...You c-couldn't have known," gently muttered Cessilia, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"You needed their help b-back then. It isn't your fault."

“No, it is, Cessilia. It’s been my mistake all along. I refused to handle all the responsibilities alone, and I tried to persuade myself I could let the leaders decide with me to divide the burden. That was so wrong. Not only did I let those bastards do what they wanted under my nose, but I didn’t even get to do anything worth it for all the tribes that deserved it.”

“That’s not t-true. It’s not as if the tribes resent you, and they know you d-didn’t just give in to the Yekara either.”

He closed his fist and didn’t answer, but Cessilia could tell from his expression that he wasn’t satisfied with that.

Ashen was carrying his guilt all over his face, but that was his burden to bear. Cessilia knew he had faced too much at way too young an age. She knew most of the Lords didn’t blame him, but at the very least, recognizing his own wrongs would only make him a better King... even if it was another painful lesson learned.

She looked down. He had let go of her hand again. She frowned and suddenly grabbed his face between her hands,

forcing him gently but firmly to look at her. Ashen opened his eyes wide at her, stunned. Cessilia actually took him by surprise.

“You may not have b-been the best King,” she said, “but you are a g-good man, Ashen. So please, d-don’t close

yourself to the p-people who want to help you. I will b-be with you from now on. I’m not leaving you. If you made mistakes, we c-can repair them, together. I want t-to stay by your side.”

“...I know,” he muttered.

He gently held her hand against his cheek, and moved his head slightly to kiss her palm.

“I d-don’t think we have a lot of time for that,” Cessilia blushed.

“Later,” he whispered. “After all this is over, I want to spend all the time I have with you.”

“It’s a p-promise, then.”

“It is.”

She smiled, feeling a bit shy. It felt almost outrageous that the two of them could still be so loving toward each other in such a situation. Yet, her heart felt as if it was overflowing with love for him. Ashen had changed and, if possible, he had become even more handsome in her eyes. She really wanted to hug him, but they didn’t have the time for that. Instead, she put a quick kiss on his lips, leaving him with a smile on.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“For what?”

“For being so patient with this stubborn lover of yours.”

Cessilia blushed and chuckled, and they finally parted, although still holding hands, tighter than before. As they were

just about to leave the spot they were in, a loud dragon growl was heard in the distance. They ran to the closest window,



immediately spotting the large red fire Naptunie had just set as a warning. At least, she was fine. Meanwhile, their eyes quickly found the large Black Dragon next, exactly on the bridge they had positioned it at, being assaulted by a myriad of strange ants.

The humans had found ways to breach the gate, and began crawling onto the bridge, trying to get past the large dragon. They would probably take a while before managing to get past Krai, but that still wasn't anywhere near good news for them. It meant the Yekara allies had already won over that side of the Outer Capital...

"...Let's get going," groaned Ashen. "The sooner we finish things here, the sooner we can go and get rid of the ones

outside. ...Will your father's dragon be alright?"

"Of c-course," nodded Cessilia. "It's my father's d-dragon, after all. Darsan p-probably told him not to use his fire, bbut

there is no way Krai will lose t-to a group of humans."

Ashen nodded. He knew the power of the dragons enough himself.

They turned away from the window, and began running up the stairs again. They were now more eager than ever to end

this, especially as they could hear the ruckus echoing throughout the castle, coming from both above and below. Had more of

their allies entered the castle as well? Or were those the Yekara reinforcements coming to take down the King? Hard to tell, as

all the sounds were distorted and echoed irregularly, but it only made them speed up.

The fights encountered on the way were easy, but they were slowly wearing them down for sure, which somehow

seemed to be their goal. All the soldiers they ran into were primarily aiming to end Ashen's life, targeting his injury and trying

to injure him no matter what, which made Cessilia suspect they were afraid of him getting upstairs the most. The real,

legitimate King being alive was a huge thorn in the Yekara Leader's plan, and his adopted brother's. They needed to get rid of

him, to end the fights outside and prove the King was dead. There probably weren't enough men in the whole castle to stop

their duo, though. After many fights faced together, against one to a dozen people at once, Cessilia and Ashen had already found

the best ways to work together, now forming a perfect pair of fighters. Even in tight areas, or against several scattered enemies,

they were undefeatable. Following her brother's suggestion, Cessilia wasn't restraining herself anymore and, when she truly

hesitated again, Ashen was there to give the finishing blow. His presence was making her more determined, especially as they

were protecting each other. She was keeping his injury in mind, and trying to cover any blind spot of his in each fight. It was

also a huge advantage that they had both been trained by the War God himself; like Tessandra and her siblings, their fighting

style was suitable to complete each other efficiently.

“We’re almost there,” he announced after another set of stairs. “The next one is the throne room...”

Cessilia hadn’t had enough days to accustom herself to the complex castle structure, but she did recognize the corridors they had been in for a few minutes now. Her blood rushed even faster in her veins, her stomach burning at the thought of the upcoming, final fight. They hadn’t caught sight of Jisel yet, but she didn’t doubt that the woman was there. From time to time, they could hear Jinn climbing around the castle, the Red Dragon’s claws making a terrible ruckus against the castle’s weaker stones. Cessilia just couldn’t call out her brother’s dragon for help yet. First, she didn’t know how Kian and Kassian’s fights were going at the moment, and secondly, she still wasn’t sure about Jisel’s real intentions of coming back to the castle.

Something definitely felt off about her dragon’s presence, and Cessilia wanted to make the situation clear before killing her...

Ashen pushed the door, and without much surprise, they found the room filled with more Yekara soldiers or hired

mercenaries and, at the very back, Lord Yebekh, standing next to the throne with Ashen’s adopted brother on it. A strange silence followed their arrival. Cessilia roughly counted about twenty fighters in the room, but her eyes were more attracted to the duo hiding at the back. Lord Yebekh had a vicious smile on, his arm leaning against the throne. ...Had he been injured too?

He looked like he was leaning strangely, but then again, he was wearing a long cape hiding most of his body. Next to him,

Ashen’s adopted brother, on the other hand, was in a terrible state, just as she had imagined. It was unbelievable that they had just propped him up there, on the throne, when his condition was that bad. He was missing an arm and leg, and the half of his body she had seen crushed was now covered in bandages soaked with blood. His eyes were open, but his lips were purple, and his eyes looked strange, as if he couldn’t focus them properly. Even from across the room, Cessilia could guess he had a fever. Strangely, though, something that looked like a wooden and metallic leg was laid against the throne, as if it was ready to be used... A prosthetic? What were they expecting to do with that? That, and the strange bottle he was holding in his only hand, were confusing Cessilia, making her even more nervous.

“There he is!” exclaimed Lord Yebekh with an amused expression. “The White King defies death, yet again. ...And he returns with the War God’s daughter by his side, of course.”

His eyes went to Cessilia but, far from the theatrical impression he was trying to put on, he couldn’t help but glare at

her. Cessilia withheld his hateful gaze, not impressed in the slightest. She was more intrigued about what in the world that mad

man had done to Ashen's adopted brother...

"You're surprisingly tenacious, Your Highness," he continued. "I've heard that you survived thanks to the War God's daughter, but I didn't think that on top of being saved by a woman, you'd have to hide behind her all this time!"

Ashen scoffed.

"That's all you have for me, Yebekh? Sorry to disappoint, but I'm not ashamed to admit she's much stronger than I am.

Sadly, at the moment, you're my problem and you've brought this bastard here to threaten my Kingdom, so I'll be the one to deal with you."

"Oh, I'm afraid not," chuckled Yebekh. "See, I've kept all my very best warriors here to stop you. And even if you do manage to survive this, your adopted brother will finish you, so everyone knows who the real heir to this Kingdom is."

Ashen glanced around. Indeed, the fighters present in this room looked nothing like the amateurs they had been dealing with since earlier. These were trained, experienced fighters and warriors, each with their own weapons. Next to him, Cessilia was also glaring at the group facing them. Just like him, she acknowledged these were no ordinary fighters and would put up much more of a fight than the ones they had to deal with until now...

"...What do you think?" he asked her in a mutter.

"Nothing you c-can't handle. ...But I'll save you some t-time, for everyone's sake."

"Fine. But my adopted brother is mine to fight. You leave him to me."

"Yes, I know."

Ashen smiled and, to Yebekh's surprise, stepped to the side, leaving Cessilia plenty of space by his side, both of them raising their weapons, ready to go at it again.

At the other end of the room, Yebekh's expression fell. He had probably hoped for Ashen to tell Cessilia to stay out of this, since his male pride was doubted out loud, but it didn't work. The King had grown enough already, and had no issue with acknowledging his female partner's undeniable strength.

"Ah! Fine! You two shall die together, then!"

His words resonated like a call to attack, and the men facing them jumped at the same time.