

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!”