

## 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... Sabaël 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 c-can 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-tried 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 K-Kingdom 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 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.”