

## 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 b-because she refused t-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 aunties 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 p-particular 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 well-raised 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!”