

Chapter 24

When Cessilia came back out of the tunnel, accompanied by Aglithia, she found the little shop completely empty; it seemed like Nana and Darsan had gone ahead with the armor. It wasn't surprising; she and Aglithia had taken the extra time to select a couple of the very well-designed maps of her clan, which they were carrying now.

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

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

Despite all the ruckus in the room, Naptunie was quickly sharing with them what they had heard from the Cheshi, perfectly retelling the legend of the dragons, as well as everything they had learned about their relationship to their ancestors. Cessilia gave the armor to Tessandra in silence so as not to interrupt Nana, and began putting her own on. The armor was indeed heavy, and it took her a while just to attach each piece.

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

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

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

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

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

“...How d-do you feel?” she asked.

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

“Much better, now that you’re here. ...I’m sorry about earlier.”

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

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

“It’s alright...”

“Cessi.”

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

“...You’ve been busy,” he muttered. “The Cheshi, huh?”

“They d-don’t hate you.”

“Just my luck.”

“Ashen... your m-mom was one of theirs.”

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

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

“C-can you work with them?”

“I’ll make do,” he chuckled. “It’s not like I have much of a choice... and they are still part of this Kingdom after all. Your friend Naptunie is right. It’s high time they took part in this. Plus, the armor is pretty cool indeed.”

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

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

Her eyes went down to the spot under his armor, but to her surprise, Ashen guided her fingers for her to touch his abs. Cessilia blushed, but even more surprising, she felt the very distinct and familiar touch of smooth skin that characterized a scar. She frowned, confused, and her fingers followed the line, confirming it. A new scar? How could there already be such a clean and neat scar? While she got lost in her questions, Ashen suddenly shuddered.

“Um... Cessi. It tickles.”

She blushed and took her hand back, realizing she had been caressing him unintentionally. Flushed and looking aside, Cessilia cleared her throat loudly, taking a step back.

“How... how d-did?”

“I gave him some blood.”

Her eyes went to Kassian, who was ready on the side in beautiful blue-gray armor, his arms crossed and a couple new weapons lined his back. He stepped forward, his eyes on Ashen.

“I gave him some of my blood... so he could heal faster. Dragon blood is surprisingly efficient, and we had already established he was compatible the first time we found him...”

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

“You’re not the only one who got lessons from mom,” chuckled Kassian, giving her a quick kiss on her temple. “He’s not fully healed, but it will

be enough for today. It's not like the King can take a rest day while we reconquer his Kingdom, right?"

His green eyes went to Ashen, who nodded, an air of humility painted all over his face. Cessilia wondered how these two had come to an understanding while she was gone... It seemed like they had resolved a thing or two, and now, they were back to that precious bond of deep trust between them. She felt a bit happy about it, although she could still feel some tension.

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

"Thanks. Father used to have armor like this... one made of Krai's dead scales. It wasn't as well-crafted as this, but I was always curious about it. Krai was the only dragon that shed his scales, so there was only his that could be made, and not enough material to replace it."

"I'm glad these will be helpful to you!" declared Lady Aglithia. "They all suit you very well."

Cessilia glanced around. Indeed, they had picked well. Ashen's silver-white armor was perfect with his hair, and covered the injured area too, which was the main reason she had picked it in the first place. Tessandra's armor was perfect for a very mobile bearer, and Kassian's was a perfect balance between a heavy defense and enough freedom of movement as well. Nana could only carry forearm protections that Darsan was helping her tighten and a small dagger, but it would probably be enough. Cessilia had no intention to have Naptunie in the middle of the battle, anyway.

"Cessi, whatever the plan is, we should get started soon," Tessandra declared, her eyes looking out the windows. "The sun has nearly risen."

Only a short span of time had passed since Cessilia and Aglithia had come back from the Cheshi household, but each minute was unbearably precious at the moment. She nodded, and used the table Ashen had been lying on the previous night to lay down the map in front of them.

Thanks to the Cheshi's years of keeping an accurate track of the changes within the Capital, this was probably the most accurate representation they

could find of Aestara and its surroundings, including the four bridges. Everyone gathered around, serious and ready to listen to Cessilia's plan.

"We n-need to keep the fight within the Inner Capital," she said, her finger surrounding the main island. "We c-can't bring Kian or K-Krai in, as they would destroy t-too much and risk harming people, b-but we can use them to c-confine the fight."

"If anyone tries to cross a bridge, they should grill them!"

"But we have people willing to fight in the Outer Capital too," said Nana. "My tribe's people that were outside the walls are already gathering, so are the rest of the Hashat, and even the surviving Pangoja!"

"We d-don't need to block all the bridges," nodded Cessilia. "Krai can t-take the southeast one, Kian the northeast, and D-Darsan the northwest. We should leave the southwest one, where we are now, open for people to c-come in and help us. If we focus all our s-strength on one bridge, it will b-be more manageable."

"It's a good plan, Cessi, but we are running out of time... Sab is running out of time. We don't have time to wait until we reconquer all the way to the Inner Capital! They will see us coming!"

"We c-can use the Cheshi's secret tunnels," declared Cessilia.

Aglithia nodded, and stepped forward, pointing out several locations in the Inner Capital.

"Almost all of our secret tunnels lead to the main residence of our tribe, and from there, we have dozens of access points into the Inner Capital. We can be anywhere in minutes, and launch a simultaneous surprise attack, if we find a way to signal one group to another from far away."

"We can use colored fires!" exclaimed Naptunie. "With the right ingredients, I can easily create fires that will blow up fast, are easy to control, and can be seen from far away!"

"Let's do that, then," nodded Kassian. "We can split into groups, each leading one, and start several fights in the Capital. One will be focused on

rescuing the hostages, the other on invading the castle to take it back and kill the Yekara Leader, and whoever else they might put in our way.”

“Darsan will lead everyone coming from the outside and guide them into the Capital. The breach of the gate should alert the Yekara enough and force a lot of them to come out, but it’s going to turn into an all-out battle if the citizens get involved... we risk injuring a lot of people in the process.”

“I can have my people spread the word,” said Bastat. “We can suggest the citizens stay inside, or go where it’s safe, just remain out of the streets. I’ll also try to ensure the injured are taken to the Hashat hospitals. Lady Ishira and I have grown close, I’m sure we will work well together.”

“Kassian, Aglithia, Cessilia, and I need to lead the attacks inside then,” said Tessandra.

“I’m sure many more will follow us once they see what is happening,” nodded Aglithia. “If they see an organized, armed resistance, there is no doubt the other tribes will come out of hiding and help too. They may not be fighters, but they are not helpless. They wouldn’t have survived the Tyrant’s reign otherwise.”

Next to her, Naptunie nodded firmly, also agreeing to this. In fact, Cessilia, Tessandra, and Ashen thought just the same. They had seen for themselves, many times, that the Eastern Kingdom’s tribes were resilient. Although there would definitely be trouble and damage within the Inner Capital, they had to hope everyone would be able to defend themselves, at the very least.

“We estimate the Yekara troops to be a thousand people,” suddenly said Aglithia.

“...A th-thousand?” groaned Cessilia.

“Yes. At least, within the Capital. We suspect they might have more forces prepared outside of the Capital, and hired a lot more people using the Pangoja’s money. We’re talking about mercenaries, bandits, and hired fighters.”

“That’s going to be a fun bunch to punch!” exclaimed Darsan, getting excited all by himself.

“More like a lot of trouble,” groaned Kassian. “That means we will have enemies coming from all sides and without much order. Even if the dragons manage to keep their external reinforcements out, their goal will be to make the fight last until they kill Ashen.”

All eyes went to the white-haired king. His dark eyes were still riveted on the map, but he straightened with a smirk on his lips.

“They can try,” he said. “It won’t be the first time they’ve tried to get rid of me, and I’m not willing to let them win.”

“...I’m sorry to report, your... adopted brother survived,” muttered Aglithia. “He’s wounded, but some of our spies confirmed they saw him getting geared up for battle.”

“He’s mine,” immediately growled Ashen. “Let me fight him.”

In fact, Cessilia was more than happy to let him do so. Ashen’s state was, at the very least, probably as bad as his brother. She would have said something against it if she hadn’t seen that adopted brother of his crushed partially by an enormous rock. Even if he had survived, she doubted the man was back to his full capacity.

“...What about th-that woman, Jisel?” she asked Aglithia.

“No sign of her,” she shook her head, “but that can’t be good...”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a glance across the table, her cousin grimacing. Cessilia hesitated. ...Should she have gotten rid of that woman when she had the chance, or left her to die? Somehow, she couldn’t, and Cessilia knew she would have made the same choice over again. A part of her just couldn’t bring herself to fully hate Jisel. Perhaps it was this sense of commonality, the strange bond of blood they shared. Perhaps it was because she found that woman pitiful, or her ever so unclear intentions. Either way, she just couldn’t make up her mind yet.

“...We will see if sh-she appears,” she declared. “Perhaps she f-fled already.”

This might have been hopeful on her part, but Cessilia wished for Jisel to disappear and never come back again. She had a feeling things wouldn't be that simple though...

“Alright...” said Tessandra. “We have a plan, and everyone knows what they have to do. Shall we get going before my boyfriend really gets his head chopped off? It's my first relationship and I do not want it to end in a shitty tragedy.”

“Calm down, Tessa,” scoffed Darsan, putting his fists on his hips. “We're going to rescue that boy of yours, alright. The lad doesn't even know what he's signing up for, maybe he's better off dead, haha!”

All eyes went to him, no one finding this very funny. Even Cessilia was glaring at her brother's cruel lack of delicacy, but the one pair of eyes that seemed to melt his grin away was Nana's. Then, Tessandra chuckled and bumped her elbow into his arm.

“By the way, Darsan. My boyfriend you've been making fun of just happens to be Naptunie's dear older brother. Just so you know.”

His expression fell, replaced by sheer panic as he slowly realized his mistake. Cessilia realized, no one had referred to Sab as Nana's older brother until now... She sighed. At least Darsan would take things a whole lot more seriously now. Ashen suddenly grabbed her hand, gently.

“Let's get going,” he said. “Cessilia, Tessandra, and I will attack at the main plaza first to rescue the hostages, then we will part ways to reconquer the castle.”

“I'll make sure to stay as mobile as possible,” nodded Kassian.

“I will be with you,” Lady Bastat suddenly announced. “This way, we can rally more people as we move through the streets.”

Kassian's green eyes went to her with a hesitation.

“...Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Slowly, she took out a long, strange little rope that had been tied around her waist all this time. She removed the gorgeous ornament that was hanging at one end for all to see the dangerous, pointy blade it had been hiding all along, and she smiled back at him.

“It’s just like we said. We may not be fighters, but we are not defenseless. I will manage. I also have a score to settle for my father’s murder.”

A faint smile appeared on Kassian’s lips, and he nodded.

“Let’s go,” said Cessilia.