

Chapter 25

They agreed to split up right outside Bastat's house, as Darsan had to go to Krai to give instructions and post the large Black Dragon at the agreed upon door, while Lady Bastat and Kassian were going to have Kian drop them in the lower part of the Capital, away from the castle and the Central Plaza, to gather as much attention as possible and have the Yekara head to them first.

Kassian smiled softly and came to hug his sister gently.

"Take care of yourself, alright? ...You too, Tessa."

"You know me," she said with a wink.

Kassian nodded, and turned his green eyes to his sister. They exchanged a long, intimate glance, then he quickly kissed her head, his fingers caressing her curls. Cessilia smiled, hugging her big brother back. Kassian had always been the protective kind, but he had been even more so after what had happened to her. He glanced at Ashen over her shoulder, the King staying expressionless, although he was obviously waiting to grab Cessilia's hand back the second he could. Kassian chuckled, and took a step back, parting with his sister.

"If anything happens to my sister..."

"It won't."

The two men exchanged a long stare, although far less tense than before. Cessilia smiled, and when Ashen took her hand, she held on tight.

Meanwhile, Darsan was fidgeting next to Naptunie, shifting his weight from one leg to another with an awkward expression.

"So, uh... You... You have to be careful, alright?"

“I will!” exclaimed Naptunie, decided.

Darsan nodded, although not convinced.

“I’m going to beat a lot of those brutes, alright? I promise none of them will be taking a step inside the Inner Capital!”

“We will be counting on you!”

Naptunie’s smile was so blinding and yet she was completely oblivious to Darsan’s feelings. He stared at her for a few seconds, hesitating, and suddenly grabbed her hands, making her gasp in surprise, her eyes opened wide on their joined hands.

“I’m going to show you, Nana! How great of a husband I will be!”

“U-uh... I see... I mean... A-alright?”

He then nodded, visibly satisfied, and turned around, proudly walking away toward the gates. Kassian chuckled, amused by his brother’s antics, and turned around too, followed closely behind by Lady Bastat. Meanwhile, Naptunie stood there for a few more seconds, completely shaken up, her hands even still hanging mid-air. Cessilia chuckled, and both she and Tessandra stepped next to their confused friend.

“...Say...” Nana muttered, “by any chance, does... does Sir Darsan...?”

“Love you?” chuckled Tessandra. “Yeah, big time. I’m pretty sure he fell pretty hard for your charms.”

“What?!”

She screamed and turned to them, her face surprisingly red.

“N-n-no way!”

“Yes way,” sighed Tessandra, pulling her in the right direction. “He’s been pretty obvious too, Nana. It’s amazing you’re the only one who hasn’t noticed until now.”

“But he’s... he’s a prince!”

“Literally no one cares,” laughed Tessandra. “Plus, Darsan probably destroyed pretty much anything he might have inherited. He is a prince in name alone, Nana, don’t freak out about that. If you’re worried, worry about being proposed to by a walking natural disaster.”

“Proposed to?!”

Cessilia chuckled, but they didn’t have time to answer poor Naptunie’s interrogations right now. The rest of their group, including Ashen, rushed to the secret passage again, following Aglithia. While Tessandra happily kept teasing Nana on the way, they still made a point to rush behind the Cheshi guiding them. The tunnel was too narrow for them to properly run, so they were walking very quickly instead, rushing to the other side. They had only a few minutes left, and they would have to match their timing with the dragons’ attacks on the other side of the Inner Capital. Cessilia even suspected Tessandra kept chatting with Naptunie as a way to distract both of them from the urgency of the situation.

She and Ashen were at the back, not saying a word all this time, but they had their hands firmly locked together, and neither of them had any intention to let go, even as they had to walk one behind the other in the more narrow sections of the tunnel. Cessilia could feel the tension in Ashen’s fingers, and she could understand that. Only a few hours had passed since he had fought with his adopted brother and his ex-mistress had stabbed him. She swallowed her saliva, a feeling of guilt coming forth.

“...About th-that woman...”

“I don’t regret anything,” he immediately retorted. “I apologized to her, but I am not sorry for choosing you. She knew my heart would never be hers, and she was using me as much as I was using her. Her anger comes from another place, even if I might have fueled it some more.”

“I know,” suddenly answered Cessilia. “I’m not mad at you, b-but I don’t regret letting her go this one t-time. But if she g-gets in our way again, I won’t be so k-kind.”

“...I understand.”

They exchanged a faint smile, and Ashen gently tightened his grasp around her hand. Staring back into his dark eyes, Cessilia felt like something had definitely changed in him. Perhaps since he and Kassian had sorted out the truth about why he had been really forced to leave the Dragon Empire, Ashen seemed... happier, lighter. The way he looked at her too. It was a bit... different. There was something more serene but also, more... bittersweet about it.

“...What is it?”

“I’m happy like this. I know we’re about to run into battle, but... I’ve felt more free in the past eight hours, hiding from the world and staying with you, than I’ve been in a long time. I feel like I’ve found something I had lost. I don’t know how to describe it, but after I spoke with Kassian, I felt like something finally got... fixed inside. Before that, I was always... angry, unsure, and even madder at myself for constantly doubting everything. I felt like I had to repeatedly toughen myself up to survive, and bury my emotions inside, negative or positive. Now... I feel like I can finally be myself, thanks to you being here. I don’t care anymore about being the King. Actually, no, for the first time, I truly feel like the King of this Kingdom. I feel like this is my place, and I am ready to defend it. I finally know why I’ll be fighting.”

Cessilia smiled.

She was glad, but deep inside, she felt a little part of her was disappointed too. Disappointed in herself. When she had come here, she had found a broken Ashen, a man who was nothing more than the dark, angry shadow of the boy she had once met. Now, she could tell this Ashen she was holding hands with was the one she had been yearning for all along. The true partner she needed, a man who could stand tall and strong, bold, and not hide his intentions anymore. He wouldn’t have to submit to the willfulness of the Lords, or act so cold all the time. He had truly grown, in such a short time.

Meanwhile, she...

“Lady Naptunie,” suddenly said Aglithia, climbing up the stairs off the tunnel. “This is the starting point of all of our tunnels. If you’re not coming with us to fight at the plaza, you should take a different tunnel, and head to the port as fast as possible. Ask my people, they will show you which one to take. If you can signal us when the Yekara spot the Silver Dragon, we will know when to strike at the Central Plaza.”

“I will! I can grab what I need at my auntie’s place, and climb on the roof of her house. It’s not raining too much, so you should be able to see the fire from very far!”

“Find a place to stay hidden as soon as you’re done, Nana,” said Tessandra. “Alright? We won’t be able to save you if something happens, so make sure no one notices you.”

“What? But I want to be useful! I even put on these heavy protections! I should be able to help like Lady Bastat!”

“You’re no fighter, Nana, you know that!”

“J-just make sure you s-stay out of harm’s way,” said Cessilia. “S-stay with your family, but we will fetch you when we c-can.”

Naptunie nodded, but she didn’t seem too happy about this. Cessilia could understand. Although she didn’t have any fighting abilities other than her knowledge, this was about saving her older brother’s life. Plus, Naptunie had been brave enough to stay by their side all this time, and had grown a lot in the process too.

“Nana, you need to t-talk to the Dorosef Tribe for us,” Cessilia added. “They are the b-biggest tribe of all, if you c-can get them to help us out, p-perhaps we can spare many lives during the upcoming fight.”

Naptunie’s eyes lit up again, and she immediately nodded, clearly very happy.

“I will!”

“Good, because this is where we split,” announced Aglithia, who had just stepped out of the tunnel first, into the Cheshi residence.

She extended her hand to help Tessandra and then Naptunie climb up, and turned around, showing Naptunie a corridor.

“If you continue this way and get to the blue door with a white marking on it, two of the triplets should be ready inside. They will show you how to take the tunnel, and accompany you too; once you’re inside that tunnel, you’ll find stairs that go up and lead into a sea-level cave. It’s a smaller tunnel, but luckily, so are you! As soon as you get out of the cave, you’ll find man-made stairs to climb up, which leads to one side of the port. It’s invisible to most people, but you’ll end up right behind the docks! You can ask one of them to come to us once you’re safe or if you need to message us.”

“I’ll be fine!” exclaimed Naptunie, still visibly upset about being sent away from the fight. “...Cessi, Tessa, you make sure to save my brother, and the others, please? And stay safe!”

“We will, Nana, don’t worry.”

To her surprise, both of the cousins suddenly grabbed Naptunie to hug her, making some noise with their armor. Still, Naptunie smiled, prouder than ever.

“I’ll do my best!” she exclaimed, surprisingly clenching her fists just like Darsan before.

Then, she turned around and ran. Tessandra chuckled.

“You know... It didn’t hit me until now, but maybe she would be a good pair with that meathead Darsan, after all.”

“Of c-course she would,” smiled Cessilia, before turning to Aglithia.

“Let’s go.”

Aglithia nodded and guided them, once again, through the Cheshi residence. It was a very brief walk, just two corridors away. They arrived in a large open space, an indoor garden filled with people. As soon as they entered, everyone present, men and women, put a knee down in one spectacularly synchronized motion.

“The Cheshi Clan greets the White King! We greet the Imperial Dragon Princesses!”

Tessandra grimaced, very uneasy about the title referring to her as well. Meanwhile, Cessilia nodded, and Ashen turned to Aglithia.

“That’s everyone?”

“Half of them,” she said. “The others are already going to the south to help out Prince Kassian and Lady Bastat, and another group is currently watching the area around the Central Plaza. Even those here will know to split up in several directions to take control of all the streets.”

“It won’t be an easy fight.”

To their surprise, Aglithia’s father appeared behind them, wearing full battle gear as well. His outfit was surprisingly similar to those of his men, who wore very simple dark garbs, with reinforced leather protections and pieces of armor. Some wore colored chevrons, probably sub-leaders meant to lead their groups. Aglithia’s father only wore more dark steel, and large shoulder protections that made him look taller, especially with those two swords at his flanks. The man glanced at Ashen, his eyes going up and down on his figure, and very faintly, he bowed to him and Cessilia, who were still holding hands and standing next to each other.

“...My King,” he said.

“So now you’ll admit it,” scoffed Ashen.

“We have made some urgent decisions.”

Cessilia softly pulled on Ashen’s arm, a bit annoyed with his sudden show of pride. She knew he had bad blood with the Cheshi, but they really didn’t have time for that now. He sighed, but looked away, visibly withholding his disagreement with the Cheshi Leader. They could always solve the issues between them at a later time, and from the way Aglithia’s father was staring at the King, Cessilia thought they had a lot to discuss indeed...

“...We are ready to go any time,” he finally said.

Cessilia nodded.

“The sooner the b-better.”

“Then let’s get going now.”

They turned around, following Aglithia who was leading them to another of their secret passages. This time, they had about a hundred men following right behind them, although the large group strangely made close to no sound at all. Tessandra glanced at the floor beneath them, but their light step technique was just impressive. Some of them even climbed up the roof, using a different, more aerial way to get to the plaza before them.

While Aglithia was running ahead, her father was right behind Ashen and Cessilia, side by side with Tessandra, and all the other Cheshi fighters behind them. This time, the tunnel they were using, hidden under what seemed to be a fake tombstone, was actually large enough that two or three people could stand side by side, and for everyone to run, which they all did.

“Aglithia will stay with you while I lead the men within the Capital,” explained the Cheshi Clan Leader. “They all will know what to do and whom to fight, and half of our leaders were already told to stick with you no matter what, so all our troops won’t be scattered away from you; plenty of them will stick by your side to help when you get inside the castle, notably.”

As Cessilia nodded, the man suddenly stepped to the side where the tunnel split in two. He swiftly disappeared down the branch, with the men behind them knowing exactly whom to follow. Cessilia felt her heartbeat quicken. This time, they were heading to the real battle. Only a few minutes had passed since they had left Bastat’s house, but now, everything was accelerating. She hoped Naptunie would be fine, far from the main battle.

Ashen gently held her hand once more.

“...Ready?” he muttered.

Cessilia nodded.

Suddenly, in front of them, Aglithia stopped, gesturing for all of them to stop as well. They all froze, and she climbed the stairs first to judge the situation. Then, she gestured for them to follow, Tessandra running ahead to see where they had arrived. The inside of the building looked like an abandoned restaurant or hostel. The furniture had been carefully piled up against the windows, as if to create a barricade. They all ran to see what was going on outside the windows.

The Cheshi hadn't lied. They were literally steps away from the plaza. In fact, they were so close that they felt like they were part of the crowd in the streets around the building, who were loudly protesting.

“Fuck, Sab...”

Hearing her cousin's cry, Cessilia's heart dropped for a second, but she quickly found Sabael. He was alive, but lined up with other people on a little platform. He had been badly beaten, and was barely recognizable, with his tumefied face, the blood all over his body and his ripped up clothes.

“I can't believe they left him half-fucking-naked out there!”

Cessilia sighed. Sabael wasn't the only one in bad shape. There were at least twenty people lined up, their hands hung above their heads, and all looked to be gravely injured. Some even seemed to have passed out, or had terrible injuries exposed. No wonder the crowd was protesting so loudly despite the threat of the Yekara soldiers.

There were a lot, indeed. Not only the Yekara and their red uniforms, but those mercenaries Aglithia had mentioned, carrying large weapons and intimidating the crowd, visibly looking for the first opportunity to spill blood. Cessilia glanced around, but she didn't recognize the Yekara lieutenant who was on the platform, speaking out loud. She couldn't hear well from inside the building, but he was apparently listing some wrongs for which the captives were about to be killed. He was pacing around on the platform, reading some paper out loud, and ignoring the crowd that kept swearing and insulting him. There was a wide space of about four feet between the platform and the Yekara soldiers that were keeping the

crowd at bay, but the tension was rising. No one was willing to see their relatives or friends die, but from what Cessilia could see, they had no weapons to fight the Yekara. She even recognized some of the Dorosef people angrily holding their cooking utensils, as if ready to fight with spatulas, skewers, and pans if needed. They weren't the only ones. After the last few days spent in the Kingdom, Cessilia could recognize faces from almost each tribe in the crowd, or from their attire or hairstyles. Although it was mildly dangerous, the number of people in that crowd was already impressive enough. It was as if all of the tribes had gathered there to protest.

“Any minute now,” groaned Tessandra, impatient. “What the fuck are we waiting for?!”

Cessilia glanced back, but indeed, the last Cheshi had come out of the tunnels, and everyone was taking their weapons out, ready to fight.

“The signal,” she muttered with a smile. “Any second now...”

Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a quick glance and separated their hands, each grabbing their weapons of choice. For Ashen, a long, heavy, and beautifully designed sword similar to the one Darsan had picked, and for Cessilia, a pair of twin blades, sharp and light, and a small dagger. They smiled at each other, ready.

“Don't go too far,” he said.

“I won't.”

Suddenly, they heard the signal, loud and clear like a battle cry.

A dragon's powerful growl in the distance.

Everyone in the room tensed up. Cessilia, Tessandra, and Aglithia all raised an arm, keeping everyone silent and steady behind them. It was too soon for them to come up, this was just the beginning. From the cry, the Dragon girls knew that was Kian the Silver Dragon, probably revealing its presence to their enemies. Not only was that growl loud and echoing but the dragon's silver streak in the dark sky ought to have been impressive and attention-catching in itself.

They watched the reaction in the Central Plaza, the crowd immediately turning their heads to see where the loud growl had come from. Many immediately spotted the dragon, pointing up at the sky. People screamed, but some almost sounded like they were loudly cheering the appearance of another legendary creature. The members of the Dorosef and Sehsan Tribes that were present looked ecstatic as they already knew about Krai, and the presence of another dragon could only mean the Princess had received reinforcements. As expected, the Yekara were not among those who rejoiced. From where she stood, Cessilia very clearly saw the face of the man who was standing on the execution deck sink, his jaw dropping. Right after that, he began shouting orders, angrily pointing at the sky, spitting words to his men on the ground. Tessandra smiled next to her; their plan was working. In just minutes, half of the Yekara soldiers present on the plaza moved to the Inner Wall, their eyes regularly checking the sky above. Because they were on the same level as the crowd, it was hard to see exactly how many soldiers remained. They could see at least two dozen of them still blocking the crowd from approaching the platform. With the prospect of a dragon coming to their rescue and so many soldiers leaving, the whole area grew louder. The locals became even more vehement in their protests and were trying to break through the line of soldiers, not hesitating to try and shove them.

Cessilia was growing nervous, waiting for Nana's signal. Was she in her designated spot yet? She hoped the young woman wouldn't run into any trouble, and found herself glad she had two of the triplets by her friend's side...

Gently, Ashen suddenly touched her hand. Cessilia turned to him, and he gave her a confident nod.

"...It's going to be alright," he muttered.

"...I know."

Cessilia was most nervous for him. Despite him hiding it well, the King was still heavily injured. What her brother's blood had done probably wasn't enough to completely heal an injury of that size. Ashen should have had a few days to rest, not head into another battle the next morning...

Cessilia held on even more tightly to the handle of her sword, determined. Now, she couldn't afford to hesitate again. Lives were at stake, and her enemies were clear. She didn't have to stop herself from killing or withhold her attacks. The Yekara were soldiers and traitors. This was a real war, not a simple duel between two young women. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she glanced to the side. Tessandra's eyes were fixated on Sabael, her dark eyes so piercing it was as if she was trying to dig a hole in the platform under his feet. How far away were they? How long could it take? Perhaps two minutes? However, those would be long minutes cutting through the crowd from here to there...

Anytime now... The tension in the room was getting heavier with each passing second. Since the crowd had spotted Kian, the dragons had probably already landed at the bridges, ready to begin guarding their own, meaning that Naptunie was the one to signal when the fights would start...

Suddenly, they heard it. A large explosion, followed by a sudden blue flash in the sky. Although everyone had been prepared to run, they couldn't help but glance back to see how the hell such a thing had been done. From the flash, only a large blue fire could now be seen in the distance, already quieting down under the rain.

"Go!" shouted Aglithia.

Their troops poured into the streets, Cessilia and her friends first. She and Tessandra both ran into the first trio of Yekara soldiers, who didn't even get a second to understand what was happening before simultaneously getting transpierced by the two women's blades. Their eyes still wide open in shock, they slid off the blades and fell aside, Tessandra and Cessilia already running past them.

It was total chaos in the street. The sudden arrival of dozens of fighters had thrown the Yekara into a complete disarray. Not only that, but the techniques of the Cheshi, who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, from the sky or a blind spot, weren't giving them any time to regroup either. Even the townsfolk were surprised and trying to get out of the way, the most combative ones still pushing to access the guarded platform.

Cessilia, Tessandra, and Ashen were unstoppable. Unlike the Cheshi who launched sudden and swift attacks, they were progressing in the open, restlessly slaying anyone in their way. Because they were the easiest to spot and attack on the way to the platform, the Yekara kept aiming at them first, thinking they'd be the first ones to stop. They were incredibly wrong. The pair of cousins were such a perfect match, covering each other's backs and synchronizing their attacks, that it looked like they were progressing with minimal effort. To those not fighting, it was a dance they wanted to stay away from and yet, quite amazing to look at. Despite the dark skies, their armor was shining brightly through the crowd, and those who recognized what they were actually made of grew even more admiring. The crowd that wasn't fighting was cheering for the duo of women fighting through the crowd, getting out of the way for them to make progress.

It was still quite a dense crowd. What had only seemed like a couple minutes' journey earlier was now turning into an awful amount of fighting and pushing through. The Yekara soldiers seemed to have received orders at some point, seeing as they thickened their ranks with reinforcements, their numbers growing larger and blocking the duo's way.

Right behind them, the King was making as much of an impression. From what they could hear, the Yekara's lies about his death had reached a lot of the inhabitants, and many of those present were celebrating their King's return. While some had figured out the lie, others were happily rejoicing about their King coming back from the underworld for the second time. No one could tell which version would make it into history...

"Somebody get to that damn platform!" Tessandra shouted between two sword swings.

Cessilia glanced ahead. The situation was urgent. The Yekara soldiers were only good at slowing them down, but that might actually make them lose the time they needed to rescue Sabael and the others. They were still entirely too far, and even the Cheshi that were trying to get to the platform were stopped. In fact, the Central Plaza was vast, and there were no buildings around that they could jump from. Everyone had to get there by

foot, and the crowd was like an army between them and the platform. With horror, they saw the man on the platform gesture to hurry and start the executions. The two cousins exchanged a glance. They didn't have time to deal with the small fry.

“Cessi, help me!”

Cessilia nodded, and suddenly ran ahead, while her cousin went back, making everyone around completely confused. While Cessilia was left to battle alone, her cousin took several steps back, before turning around, and placing her weapons back in her belt. What was she preparing? While everyone was still confused, she began running straight at Cessilia as if she was about to fight her. The speed of her run was impressive, though, enough that people actually ran to get out of the way, fearing the cannonball. However, Tessandra was aiming at her cousin alone, and, to everyone's surprise, Cessilia suddenly grabbed a random Yekara soldier among many, and used her sword at record speed. In the blink of an eye, the man was defeated on the ground, while Cessilia was holding his chest plate in her hands. Her cousin was still running at a terrifying speed toward her, but Cessilia defeated another man using that plate like a hammer, and let him fall on top of the previous man. She then stepped on both of them, and squatted down, holding the plate above her head. People understood what was going to happen one second before it actually did. Tessandra reached her, and leapt in the air; she landed on the plate for less than a second, when Cessilia, with a loud grunt, used her whole body to project it higher, giving her cousin an incredible jump base.

Tessandra jumped, and for a few seconds, it seemed almost as if she was flying above the crowd; her figure was absolutely perfect, her eyes riveted on the platform. She made a perfect arc before landing brutally, rolling on the floor and getting back up, her swords already out. What happened next was like a tornado unchained, blood flying on the closest bystanders, even the Yekara soldiers who just had the time to turn around and realize they were already too late. Tessandra's twin swords were flying around, cutting throats and freeing their allies from their ropes. The platform had become an execution stage indeed, but not the one intended. Everyone was

watching the massacre with a mix of awe and fear. Tessandra was like a goddess of wrath on a wild rampage. Strangely, though, she had left one man tied, while the other hostages had been let free and had run off the platform already. He was watching her do her little show, a wry smile on his lips. When it was only the two of them left on the platform, for a brief moment before more Yekara soldiers came up, did she turn to him, out of breath but a fierce smile stuck on her face.

“Hey there, handsome,” she chuckled. “Miss me much?”

“I was wondering why you left me tied,” sighed Sabael. “Should I be worried that you’re enjoying this position a bit too much?”

Tessandra bit her lower lip, looking him up and down. He was held with his wrists tied above his head, and his feet barely touching the floor. She chuckled and glanced down, her eyes stopping on his exposed abs, her fingers softly touching them and making him shiver.

“...Hm, maybe,” she said, “but I do not like seeing you all injured, handsome.”

“It’s not like I gave them permission to,” he sighed.

“I know,” said Tessandra, caressing his cheek. “...Only I get to kick your ass.”

She finally cut down the rope holding him with a smug smile but, to her surprise, Sabael suddenly pulled her into a passionate kiss. In the crowd, Cessilia, who had lifted her eyes, catching a break and to see how the situation was on the platform, happened to witness that moment, and chuckled, surprised by Sabael’s boldness. She hoped Naptunie was somewhere she could also witness this...

Back on the platform, Tessandra was so shocked she had almost dropped her swords, only holding her arms apart so she wouldn’t mistakenly stab her lover. When Sabael ended their kiss, she stood there, a bit speechless.

“...What was that?” she blushed uncontrollably, trying to stay cool still.

“I really missed you,” he sighed.

Tessandra cleared her throat, trying to hide her embarrassment, and suddenly remembered to lower her arms.

“I may have missed you too... You’re not too embarrassed to be rescued by a lady?”

“Not really. That will be a cool story to tell our kids later.”

He smiled and grabbed a sword abandoned on the platform, quickly stretching his shoulders that were most likely sore before beginning to fight off the soldiers that were climbing up to stop them. Meanwhile, Tessandra was left behind, still processing what he had just said.

“Kids?!” she exclaimed. “Our kids, you said?!”

She rejoined the fight excitedly by his side, the two of them pretty much unstoppable. They completely dominated the platform, despite the Yekara’s attempts to reconquer it.

On the ground, a few steps away, Cessilia had also made great progress, Ashen replacing Tessandra by her side in the pit. She caught sight of her cousin joyfully fighting beside her lover. They had managed to rescue everyone there, but that was only the first part of the plan.

Just as she thought so, another flash blinded everyone, a red one this time. The fighting had begun on the other side, in the area where Kassian and Lady Bastat were supposed to stand together. How many Yekara were they possibly facing? It was impossible to know. Now that they were in the open, Cessilia was actually able to turn her head and spot Naptunie, standing on a roof with a gigantic fire by her side. She wasn’t alone, it seemed, with three smaller silhouettes by her side. Two of the triplets and another ally? She looked safe and sound for now, but now, her position was known to everyone. Next to Cessilia, several Yekara shouted to grab her, their fingers pointing toward the roof where the bright red fire was slowly dying. Cessilia chopped off one of the arms close to her, the limb falling at her feet with the finger still extended. While her victim cried, she glanced in Naptunie’s direction again. Luckily, her friend was already gone, evidently aware of the danger.

“We need to get to the castle!” suddenly declared Ashen by her side.

Cessilia nodded, glancing beyond the platform; they were still many streets away from the castle, but it wasn't undoable. In fact, if most of the fight happened here, it won't be long until they can reconquer the castle.

Moreover, the landscape was changing around them. From just a few protesters, the streets were now getting crowded with angry citizens, each wanting to give a piece of their mind to the Yekara people. Some were only shouting, but many had found whatever weapons they could, and were fearlessly threatening to use pans and pitchforks against the soldiers. Still, they couldn't do much fighting against trained and experienced warriors. Cessilia was worried the mob would get hurt if things got out of hand. Not only that, but despite their efforts, the number of enemies just kept rising as they continued to get more support coming. It was as if soldiers in red poured out of everywhere; soon, she understood why. Some of those people wore the attire of Yekaras, but they were clearly mercenaries until not too long ago. They didn't show the discipline to follow orders, and were trying to intimidate the crowd with violence. They didn't work well in groups either, thus they were quickly isolated by the angry crowd, provoking little fights left and right in the streets.

It looked like the Central Plaza was the epicenter of a situation that was gradually getting worse in the streets. Anger was rising, and the citizens, fueled by the return of their King, were visibly at a breaking point in their patience toward the despicable actions of the Yekara. Cessilia could hear their complaints about their houses being searched and, for a lot of them, robbed by their aggressors. Those people were no fighters, but that morning, they were getting confidence from the global movement of protests occurring everywhere. In fact, angry shouting and protests could be heard coming from all directions, people loudly expressing their anger and shoving the soldiers in red if they were brave enough to. Cessilia was as impressed as she was scared; people were gathering in protest without them even having to do anything, the word of mouth already waking up every house, all families ready to fight back. If the Yekara had taken the streets overnight, their dominion was now being pushed back, people

urging them to get out of their streets, insulting them and ganging up against them when the strength was lacking.

Although, this surely wouldn't be enough. The main leaders weren't there, but Cessilia could see their troops already preparing. She doubted they had put their main forces in the streets when they were expecting them to come and fight back. Ashen was right; they had to head to the castle to end this as soon as possible.

Luckily, Sabael and Tessandra were gathering a lot of attention on the platform, and the soldiers were now splitting up to fight the two couples, making it easier for Cessilia and Ashen to take the way around to the castle while Tessandra and Sabael kept them busy there.

“Tessa, you have to guide the people in the streets!” Cessilia shouted.

“Just go!” retorted her cousin, grunting. “I’ll let you know if the situation gets shitty here!”

She then grabbed Sabael’s hand, urging him to jump off the platform, before she suddenly turned around and exhaled a fireball, not the biggest one, but enough to aggressively set the wooden deck on fire, and the men still on it.

Cessilia nodded, and with Ashen, began running toward the castle. Aglithia was appearing next to her from time to time, jumping out of what seemed like nowhere to mercilessly murder a soldier, before disappearing again. Her technique was impressive, but it didn't allow for grouped attacks. The Cheshi were supporting them the best they could, but then, Cessilia realized, there was a lot more going on. More fighters appeared, all dressed in black, swiftly jumping on the Cheshi, assassinating the fighters just as quickly as the Cheshi murdered the Yekara. She suddenly got into close contact with one of the masked assassins, too quick for Cessilia to push them back, when Ashen jumped in front, blocking the attack with his large sword. He brutally kicked the aggressor in the chest, and pinned him down to the ground, ripping their mask off. Like the Cheshi, they had distinctive traits, strange black stripes tattooed on their faces.

“Those damn Kunu,” growled Ashen.

“We will have our revenge!” shouted the man under his sword, spitting a mouthful of blood on his last words.

“...You wish.”

He twisted his sword, finishing his opponent, and looked around, spotting the flying fighters with a sullen expression.

“We don’t have time to lose with them,” he hissed.

“Let us deal with them!” said Aglithia, suddenly appearing by their side. “The Kunu have been our rivals for a while, we should be the ones to deal with them. Just go, Your Majesties!”

Cessilia and Ashen nodded and ran ahead, only getting rid of those who stood in their way or tried to attack from above. The Central Plaza had turned into a full-on battlefield, with the large fire pit started by Tessandra in the middle. Not many would be able to follow them into the castle, indicating a hard fight ahead. Still, neither of them slowed down until they reached the first doors to the entrance of it.

Suddenly, a loud growl was heard, and they lifted their heads. Its body circled up around the castle’s main tower, claws digging into its stonewalls, Jinn the Red Dragon was glaring at them.

“...You should have finished them off,” hissed Ashen, glaring at the dragon.

Cessilia thought otherwise, but she was still shocked at the dragon’s angry attitude; Jinn was clearly threatening them. It might have been the first foreign dragon she met, but Cessilia was still experienced enough to understand the meaning of a dragon’s growl. This was clearly an angry, menacing one. It wasn’t close enough to actually attack unless it came down, but the Red Dragon was visibly bent on guarding this place. If Jinn was there, did that mean Jisel was in the castle as well? Cessilia didn’t like that woman, but she didn’t want to hold on to her resentment toward her either. The Yekara and Ashen’s adopted brother were their target, and they had already ditched her, so what was that woman possibly doing in

there? Why had she returned? Cessilia had once felt pity toward Jisel's circumstances; it was that of many women before her. Still, if she wanted to survive this, Jisel should have left with her dragon when she had the chance to. Cessilia and her brothers had spared her once; they weren't so nice as to do it twice.

There was no one guarding the first gate, but Cessilia and Ashen ran into trouble as soon as the castle door was in sight. A dozen new Yekara soldiers were lined up there guarding the entrance, clearly waiting for them, spears and swords ready.

“Will you b-be alright?”

“I'm just getting started.”

Cessilia smiled faintly. Ashen looked completely fine indeed and, from seeing the way he fought with superb moves, no one would have known he had been severely wounded just the night before. Side by side, a handful of Cheshi fighters behind them, they fearlessly cut through the lines of Yekara and traitorous Royal Guards trying to stop them. Despite the numbers, the difference in strength was massive. Ashen's sword could cut three men's waists in a single swing, violently cutting down anyone who stood in his way. A few steps away from him, Cessilia was less messy, but perhaps even more efficient. Her movements were incredibly quick, precise, and deadly. Bodies fell beneath her with minimal amounts of blood shed, most of the time with only a vital point sliced open, or fatal injuries that left them seconds to live. In just minutes, the two of them cleared their way through the gate with impressive ease, the Cheshi behind them having provided minimal support. They finally stopped moving, all their opponents dead or almost, and exchanged a glance, out of breath.

“...Ladies first,” said Ashen.

He was a bit more exhausted than she was, his torso heaving up and down under his armor. Cessilia was glad the one she had picked was perfectly protecting his injury, but also helping his posture. Whoever had crafted this truly knew the needs of a dragon warrior.

She stepped ahead, and kicked the door open for the two of them, her weapons at the ready for the next fight. Luckily, there were less soldiers guarding the entrance of the castle; the room being too large and circular had probably convinced them there was no point in defending such a vast area. Moreover, from there on, the castle was going to be divided in narrow corridors, enclosed spaces, and a handful of large rooms. There would be more than enough places more efficient than there to put a defense up. In fact, Ashen and Cessilia left the Cheshi fighters that had come with them to deal with those, while they were still catching a break, glancing around.

“...Chances are those rotten bastards are hiding in the throne room or the banquet hall,” he said.

“They will t-try to keep us from k-killing your adopted brother,” nodded Cessilia.

“They can try. I can’t wait to get rid of that wretched bastard once and for all, if he really is alive...”

That was what they had heard so far. Cessilia herself was surprised, if that was true. From what she had seen, his body had been crushed by rocks. Perhaps he had survived, but he ought to have lost a limb or two, at the very least... She couldn’t understand why the Yekara Clan Leader was holding on to that man instead of taking the throne for himself. He could have simply taken over, declaring he had been named by their fake, very brief King to take his succession. Or was it that he doubted he would be recognized as a legitimate leader? It turned out Ashen’s brother wasn’t much more welcomed by the people, though... No one was blind as to who was truly behind all this.

“Cessilia.”

Ashen gently called her name, and extended his free hand for her to take. Together, they climbed the stairs first, trusting the Cheshi would catch up with them, or spread out in the castle to get rid of more Yekara soldiers. This was more their kind of battleground, after all. Unlike the plaza from

earlier where they had been completely exposed, this time they could execute lightspeed attacks and disappear right after.

While climbing up, Cessilia tried to catch sight of what was going on outside through the windows. Not only in the Central Plaza, which she could spot in a blink, but also farther away, where her brothers and the dragons stood. She could see more fights going on, and Kian's shiny figure defending one of the bridges. It was harder to figure out the situation on the other one, but Darsan seemed to be doing fine, standing in the middle of the bridge, the bright orange armor shining through while dozens of little silhouettes were regularly thrown off to fall into the river below. She couldn't see Kassian's situation, as her brother's location was caught between all the buildings, but she could guess. It was probably like everywhere else, dozens of citizens flocking the streets to fight back with them, and Lady Bastat's tribe gathering at his side. So much had happened during such a short amount of time; Cessilia could only hope the losses on their side would be minimal. She could also see more people gathering outside the Outer Wall, hundreds of little dots moving toward the doors. Who knew how long the bridges could be defended before people managed to force their way in...?

It wasn't as if Ashen and herself weren't busy as well. Cessilia was astounded with how many people got in their way. How long had the Yekara been preparing this? How many people had they corrupted to make the castle so guarded? At each new corridor, there was another fight. Ashen's castle had suddenly turned into a maze that was not welcoming them back. Not only that, but Cessilia realized there had been a lot more fights than she had thought after they had fled the cave; there were signs of battle almost everywhere. They even ran into some Royal Guards' bodies abandoned here and there, most likely those who had tried to resist.

Ashen's anger gradually rose as he saw more and more of them. When they pushed the door to another room, finding three more bodies and a lot of blood spilled everywhere, the furniture wrecked, the floor and walls covered in blood, his piercing black eyes stayed on the bodies.

“If only I had gotten rid of the Yekara earlier... I should have known they wouldn’t be satisfied with a seat and a title. All my guards...”

“...You c-couldn’t have known,” gently muttered Cessilia, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You needed their help b-back then. It isn’t your fault.”

“No, it is, Cessilia. It’s been my mistake all along. I refused to handle all the responsibilities alone, and I tried to persuade myself I could let the leaders decide with me to divide the burden. That was so wrong. Not only did I let those bastards do what they wanted under my nose, but I didn’t even get to do anything worth it for all the tribes that deserved it.”

“That’s not t-true. It’s not as if the tribes resent you, and they know you d-didn’t just give in to the Yekara either.”

He closed his fist and didn’t answer, but Cessilia could tell from his expression that he wasn’t satisfied with that. Ashen was carrying his guilt all over his face, but that was his burden to bear. Cessilia knew he had faced too much at way too young an age. She knew most of the Lords didn’t blame him, but at the very least, recognizing his own wrongs would only make him a better King... even if it was another painful lesson learned.

She looked down. He had let go of her hand again. She frowned and suddenly grabbed his face between her hands, forcing him gently but firmly to look at her. Ashen opened his eyes wide at her, stunned. Cessilia actually took him by surprise.

“You may not have b-been the best King,” she said, “but you are a g-good man, Ashen. So please, d-don’t close yourself to the p-people who want to help you. I will b-be with you from now on. I’m not leaving you. If you made mistakes, we c-can repair them, together. I want t-to stay by your side.”

“...I know,” he muttered.

He gently held her hand against his cheek, and moved his head slightly to kiss her palm.

“I d-don’t think we have a lot of time for that,” Cessilia blushed.

“Later,” he whispered. “After all this is over, I want to spend all the time I have with you.”

“It’s a p-promise, then.”

“It is.”

She smiled, feeling a bit shy. It felt almost outrageous that the two of them could still be so loving toward each other in such a situation. Yet, her heart felt as if it was overflowing with love for him. Ashen had changed and, if possible, he had become even more handsome in her eyes. She really wanted to hug him, but they didn’t have the time for that. Instead, she put a quick kiss on his lips, leaving him with a smile on.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“For what?”

“For being so patient with this stubborn lover of yours.”

Cessilia blushed and chuckled, and they finally parted, although still holding hands, tighter than before. As they were just about to leave the spot they were in, a loud dragon growl was heard in the distance. They ran to the closest window, immediately spotting the large red fire Naptunie had just set as a warning. At least, she was fine. Meanwhile, their eyes quickly found the large Black Dragon next, exactly on the bridge they had positioned it at, being assaulted by a myriad of strange ants. The humans had found ways to breach the gate, and began crawling onto the bridge, trying to get past the large dragon. They would probably take a while before managing to get past Krai, but that still wasn’t anywhere near good news for them. It meant the Yekara allies had already won over that side of the Outer Capital...

“...Let’s get going,” groaned Ashen. “The sooner we finish things here, the sooner we can go and get rid of the ones outside. ...Will your father’s dragon be alright?”

“Of c-course,” nodded Cessilia. “It’s my father’s d-dragon, after all. Darsan p-probably told him not to use his fire, b-but there is no way Krai will lose t-to a group of humans.”

Ashen nodded. He knew the power of the dragons enough himself.

They turned away from the window, and began running up the stairs again. They were now more eager than ever to end this, especially as they could hear the ruckus echoing throughout the castle, coming from both above and below. Had more of their allies entered the castle as well? Or were those the Yekara reinforcements coming to take down the King? Hard to tell, as all the sounds were distorted and echoed irregularly, but it only made them speed up.

The fights encountered on the way were easy, but they were slowly wearing them down for sure, which somehow seemed to be their goal. All the soldiers they ran into were primarily aiming to end Ashen's life, targeting his injury and trying to injure him no matter what, which made Cessilia suspect they were afraid of him getting upstairs the most. The real, legitimate King being alive was a huge thorn in the Yekara Leader's plan, and his adopted brother's. They needed to get rid of him, to end the fights outside and prove the King was dead. There probably weren't enough men in the whole castle to stop their duo, though. After many fights faced together, against one to a dozen people at once, Cessilia and Ashen had already found the best ways to work together, now forming a perfect pair of fighters. Even in tight areas, or against several scattered enemies, they were undefeatable. Following her brother's suggestion, Cessilia wasn't restraining herself anymore and, when she truly hesitated again, Ashen was there to give the finishing blow. His presence was making her more determined, especially as they were protecting each other. She was keeping his injury in mind, and trying to cover any blind spot of his in each fight. It was also a huge advantage that they had both been trained by the War God himself; like Tessandra and her siblings, their fighting style was suitable to complete each other efficiently.

"We're almost there," he announced after another set of stairs. "The next one is the throne room..."

Cessilia hadn't had enough days to accustom herself to the complex castle structure, but she did recognize the corridors they had been in for a few minutes now. Her blood rushed even faster in her veins, her stomach

burning at the thought of the upcoming, final fight. They hadn't caught sight of Jisel yet, but she didn't doubt that the woman was there. From time to time, they could hear Jinn climbing around the castle, the Red Dragon's claws making a terrible ruckus against the castle's weaker stones. Cessilia just couldn't call out her brother's dragon for help yet. First, she didn't know how Kian and Kassian's fights were going at the moment, and secondly, she still wasn't sure about Jisel's real intentions of coming back to the castle. Something definitely felt off about her dragon's presence, and Cessilia wanted to make the situation clear before killing her...

Ashen pushed the door, and without much surprise, they found the room filled with more Yekara soldiers or hired mercenaries and, at the very back, Lord Yebekh, standing next to the throne with Ashen's adopted brother on it. A strange silence followed their arrival. Cessilia roughly counted about twenty fighters in the room, but her eyes were more attracted to the duo hiding at the back. Lord Yebekh had a vicious smile on, his arm leaning against the throne. ...Had he been injured too? He looked like he was leaning strangely, but then again, he was wearing a long cape hiding most of his body. Next to him, Ashen's adopted brother, on the other hand, was in a terrible state, just as she had imagined. It was unbelievable that they had just propped him up there, on the throne, when his condition was that bad. He was missing an arm and leg, and the half of his body she had seen crushed was now covered in bandages soaked with blood. His eyes were open, but his lips were purple, and his eyes looked strange, as if he couldn't focus them properly. Even from across the room, Cessilia could guess he had a fever. Strangely, though, something that looked like a wooden and metallic leg was laid against the throne, as if it was ready to be used... A prosthetic? What were they expecting to do with that? That, and the strange bottle he was holding in his only hand, were confusing Cessilia, making her even more nervous.

"There he is!" exclaimed Lord Yebekh with an amused expression. "The White King defies death, yet again. ...And he returns with the War God's daughter by his side, of course."

His eyes went to Cessilia but, far from the theatrical impression he was trying to put on, he couldn't help but glare at her. Cessilia withheld his hateful gaze, not impressed in the slightest. She was more intrigued about what in the world that mad man had done to Ashen's adopted brother...

"You're surprisingly tenacious, Your Highness," he continued. "I've heard that you survived thanks to the War God's daughter, but I didn't think that on top of being saved by a woman, you'd have to hide behind her all this time!"

Ashen scoffed.

"That's all you have for me, Yebekh? Sorry to disappoint, but I'm not ashamed to admit she's much stronger than I am. Sadly, at the moment, you're my problem and you've brought this bastard here to threaten my Kingdom, so I'll be the one to deal with you."

"Oh, I'm afraid not," chuckled Yebekh. "See, I've kept all my very best warriors here to stop you. And even if you do manage to survive this, your adopted brother will finish you, so everyone knows who the real heir to this Kingdom is."

Ashen glanced around. Indeed, the fighters present in this room looked nothing like the amateurs they had been dealing with since earlier. These were trained, experienced fighters and warriors, each with their own weapons. Next to him, Cessilia was also glaring at the group facing them. Just like him, she acknowledged these were no ordinary fighters and would put up much more of a fight than the ones they had to deal with until now...

"...What do you think?" he asked her in a mutter.

"Nothing you c-can't handle. ...But I'll save you some t-time, for everyone's sake."

"Fine. But my adopted brother is mine to fight. You leave him to me."

"Yes, I know."

Ashen smiled and, to Yebekh's surprise, stepped to the side, leaving Cessilia plenty of space by his side, both of them raising their weapons, ready to go at it again.

At the other end of the room, Yebekh's expression fell. He had probably hoped for Ashen to tell Cessilia to stay out of this, since his male pride was doubted out loud, but it didn't work. The King had grown enough already, and had no issue with acknowledging his female partner's undeniable strength.

“Ah! Fine! You two shall die together, then!”

His words resonated like a call to attack, and the men facing them jumped at the same time.