

Chapter 3

Ailin watched as the rays of light seeping through a small opening changed colours, from the bright yellow of the noon sun to cotton-candy pink. Somewhere at a distance, she could see a group of Rebel children around her age, maybe fourteen or fifteen, kicking a straw ball in a circle. The shortest girl, with hair pinned in two ponytails, burst into laughter as one of the boys kicked the ball into a tree. How long ago was Ailin one of those children? It felt like just yesterday she spent her days devouring books in Ide's library or playing with her friends and laughing together under a sky of stars until the moon rose to its peak and the elders would come nagging the kids to go sleep.

The envoy and the Rebels sat at the round table for what seemed like ages. As the Dragons, Flavius and the Rebels exchanged all rumours and knowledge they have gathered over the years, Ailin plopped her cheek on her hand, slowly drifting away.

"Your majesty, what do you think?" Flavius's words snapped her back to reality.

"Huh?"

"Do you know why your mother-"

"Don't call that monster my mother!" she cut him off abruptly.

The room froze for a moment. Nobody dared to make the slightest move; after all, Ailin's eyes had just lit up with the same kind of rage as those of the queen who pledged to murder every last of the dragonkind.

After a long pause, the princess cleared her throat and replied,

"Instead of guessing, why don't we take a trip to the library?"

Ide nodded their heavy head slowly, gazing into the empty space behind the princess. The members of the envoy looked at each other in confusion, but it was clear that everyone wanted to leave the meeting room, and with it the tension and awkwardness built up in the air.

"After you, child."

Figures flowed in and out of the room, their shadows, cast by the dim light from the torches, vanishing, only to reappear moments after with a book in their hands. Whereas the calm and boredom of the meeting room made the princess drowsy, inside her beloved library, she was once again her lively self.

Ailin thought of a few novels, journals and records that would help the members of the council answer the questions they posed in the earlier meeting. She sprang from one alley to another, with a stack of books growing taller and taller, until she couldn't see anything anymore, making her crash into someone. The boy, whose appearance suggested he was in the library way past his bedtime, fell back and sat on the ground confused.

"Be careful!" Ailin managed to scream out before the books dropped to the ground in cascades.

The child got up and ran away before the princess could even apologize or reprimand him for being here so late. She let out an exasperated sigh and picked the books up, this time dividing the pile into four smaller ones. When lifting the last book, she noticed a yellowish sheet lying underneath.

That's exciting, she thought, as she got up and took one of the book piles she was to deliver.

She made her way, dodging little groups of Rebels sitting on the floor or gathered around the library tables. In one hand, she carried a stack of books for the befuddled members of the envoy; in the other, she held the ancient document she was trying to decipher. Finally, she reached the corner occupied by the envoy and the two dragons.

"Here," she said absent-mindedly, still struggling with the map in her other hand.

As the others each grabbed a book brought by the princess, Flavius stood in the dark corner, deep in thought. Ailin, unable to focus amongst the echoing chatter, sat down on a stone right next to him.

This looks like a map, but neither Ebren nor Alamora look anything like this, she bit her cheeks nervously.

Moreover, the image was clearly torn out of something larger, maybe some journal or atlas, and the symbols and letters were ones that Ailin had never encountered in any of Ide's two thousand books she had swiftly made her way through since she learned how to read.

"What language is this even..." she murmured just loud enough for the historian to hear.

"May I?" he asked, holding out a hand.

She watched as Flavius stepped out to the well-lit portion of the room and held the faded page against the light, examining it from all sides. Following his green eyes, suddenly sparked with excitement at something he had discovered, Ailin felt a strange sense of familiarity she has long not experienced.

Weird, she thought. *Must be déjà vu, or maybe I'm just tired?*

"This is...this has the seal of Wrudel, but this one is at least a few hundred years old. I've never seen anything quite like it, only heard about it from my old mentor," his words ended her pondering.

"So is this a map of Wrudel from before the invasions of the people from the North?"

"No," he squinted his eyes. "The borders are far too stretched for it to be Wrudel, or any kingdom on our continent for that matter. If only there was some sort of key for it or if we knew what language this is. Do you remember where you found it?"

The princess shook her head. "It was lying on the floor. Perhaps it fell out of one of the books currently studied by your envoy, but it could've really been anything."

After a pause she added, "Let's take this to Ide. If anyone knows, it must be them."

The small group previously talking to Ide and Kron turned into a crowd of at least forty people, each wanting to throw in their two cents, but also to simultaneously listen to the wisdom of the old dragons.

"I've heard--"

“Is that a Wru map? I have a friend who-“

“I bet this was a part of the royal atlas-“

Ide, slightly irked at the seemingly ubiquitous chatter, demanded loudly, “Silence!”

No one dared to make a sound now, and the dragon could repeat their request.

“Agate, could you please fetch me the second volume of the chronicles?”

The Rebel girl, who spent night and day in the library, assumed the unofficial position of the librarian not too long ago, yet she knew exactly where to go, and was back within seconds with two documents in her hands.

“From what I remember when I catalogued the old records, this is either page 6 of part one, or 12 of part three.”

She handed part one to the historian, and part three to the princess. Almost immediately, Ailin found that a portion of page 12 was indeed missing, and the map matched the hole down to the notch. Flavius leaned in, just as hungry for answers as Ailin was.

“It’s labelled ‘Rainbow’ something, I can’t quite make out the second word.”

“Is it the Rainbow Bridge?” she asked. “That’s all I can think of. But why would it be called a bridge if it’s a landmass?”

“There are many versions of the legend, but the main consensus is that dragons and humans alike need to cross a bridge to get there. After that, each version says something different,” Ide responded.

“I’ve also heard the bridge might not be a physical one,” Kron added. “If it is however, there is legend that says it’s in-“

“Alamora,” the princess said, seeing what was on the next page. “It’s Alamora. And the map gives us exact instructions on how to get there!”

The whispers became eager exclamations. Everyone was thrilled at the idea that the myth of the Rainbow Bridge wasn’t a myth at all, that a place where humans and dragons can co-exist peacefully is at the reach of their hands, that there’d be no more evil queen, or dragon massacres.

“There is one issue though,” Flavius began. “We might not be so welcome in Alamora. Although Ebre and Alamora have been rather peaceful in the past few years, there are still some tensions at the border, due to bandits and conflicts over land ownership.”

His statement incited yet another wave of discussions. People talked over each other; some started naming their Alamoran friends, who would help them get through to Alamora, while others lamented and complained about the politics of the two kingdoms.

A distressed human with dragon wings, unnoticed by the distracted crowd, entered the library and ran straight to Ide, taking out a message from a white envelope.

“Silence, please,” Ide said with a stern expression. “Alamora can wait; we have greater worries right now. Queen Wria is not only alive and well, but is plotting to wipe the dragonkind out for good.”

