

CHAPTER 33

The darkness of the narrow alley enveloped them both, creating a small cosmos where only the two of them existed; the noise of cars a few meters away as the only background sound. She felt Adora's forehead against hers, her hand gently brushing her cheek. The echo of her words still rang in Catra's ears. "Come with me". The same ones she had already uttered the night she left. Catra had imagined a thousand times what would have happened if she had gone with her; if she had taken her hand instead of rejecting it. She had evaluated each one of the possibilities, all the possible alternatives, and they all led to the same conclusion: leaving with her would have meant keep on nullifying herself as a person; following her like she always had, like a lapdog, putting aside her own longings on her behalf, her ambitions just to be with her. Only so Adora could keep taking her for granted her. She refused it. No, she wasn't going to cling on anybody again, least of all Adora. She looked up and noticed the scratch marks on her cheek. That vision made something dark and twisted to be born in her chest; a feeling that had grown increasingly familiar in the months they had been apart.

"Please" she heard Adora whispering softly, almost begging her.

Adora's breath caressed her face, warm and sweet. That scent had meant happiness, but now it only created a void in her stomach that threatened to devour her. There was no going back, it was too late.

Catra didn't reply. She felt numb, oblivious to everything, plunged into total indifference. She straightened at last, taking a step back and away from Adora's touch as she removed the hand that still held her cheek. She looked her straight in the eye.

Adora recoiled as Catra's gaze pierced her. All the warmth that had lit her eyes before was completely gone. Her pupils had narrowed to two malevolent slits that only distilled coldness. A sneer twisted her lips as she spoke, revealing her fangs.

"Too late" she replied harshly.

Adora tried to talk to her, but the roar of an engine suddenly burst onto the scene and a motorcycle skidded into the alley's entrance, stopping dead. They both turned to look at it. The driver of the vehicle raised the visor of her helmet, revealing the white strands of her hair.

"Catra! We have to get out of here!" Scorpia exclaimed. The frantic sound of police cars could be heard in the background as they got closer and closer. Catra walked towards her without hesitation.



“Wait!”

Adora lunged forward, grabbing her wrist. She couldn't let her go, she didn't want to think about what would happen if she did. She was sure that if she let her go again she would lose her forever. “You don't have to do this, Catra.” she tried to reason. She was sure she could convince her, she just needed a little more time “This is not you. We could...” she swallowed hard trying to find the right words “We could help you, hide you from Horde. Glimmer could take you in, just like me. You wouldn't have to go through with this.” Adora let go of her wrist, sliding her hand down to hold Catra's, squeezing it affectionately “We could be together” she whispered.

Catra did not answer. She merely watched her coldly. Adora's eyes had widened with hope as she held her hand. Some golden strands had escaped from her long ponytail and now framed her pleading face. Catra jerked out of her grip. “ So you say this is not me” she said as she leaned toward her. She let out a mocking laugh, “No, of course not. The Catra you knew vanished long ago, I didn't give her time to say goodbye to anyone” she grimaced. “But don't miss her, Adora, she was just a nuisance. You're right, I'm not the same, you don't know me anymore. And you have no idea what I'm capable of.” she hissed.

Adora felt her soul sink. She stood frozen in place, not knowing what to do as she watched Catra turn around, ignoring her. Her eyes burned; she felt how the tears threatened to overflow, disfiguring her friend's silhouette as she took the helmet that Scorpia offered her and climbed behind her on the motorcycle.

“No...” Adora whispered to herself. She took a hesitant step forward, holding out her hand to...do what?

Catra wrapped her hands around Scorpia's waist, avoiding looking at her. She knew Adora was still there, she could feel her gaze piercing the back of her neck.

“Hold on tight, wild cat. We have to fly.” Scorpia said making the motorbike's engine roar at full throttle.

They bolted just as the first police car rounded the corner. They wouldn't catch them, Scorpia knew the city like the back of her hand, every shortcut and every alley. She would reach one of the bases in the area without problems.

“Catra! Catra, please!”

She heard Adora call out to her in the distance. Catra closed her eyes tightly as she sunk her face into Scorpia's shoulder, praying that the roar of the engine would drown out her voice and the racing beat of her own heart. She couldn't help, however, turning at the last moment before the motorcycle rounded the corner, only to see Adora collapsed on the ground as she continued to call out to her in desperation and her friends approached her from the bottom of the alley.

“So it was true” Mermista said with resignation.

They were all gathered in Angela's office. The director's countenance was serious. Her forehead rested on her clasped hands, but she remained silent.

“We have known for a long time that someone else was behind the latest attacks. Before, they only kidnapped discreetly, but in the last few months they didn't even bother to hide,” commented Perfuma regretfully.

“They don't need to,” Glimmer interrupted “Most of the guys involved in the wreckings were our people,” she plopped down on the couch next to Bow and crossed her arms, “They know perfectly well they're going to pin the blame on us, they don't need to hide from anyone.” she mumbled annoyed.

They were doing what they could, but it was very difficult to anticipate their movements. The only option they had left was to stand guard in front of Horde High to detect any strange movement and warn the rest, but they couldn't always skip classes to do the surveillance. And even so, lately the attacks were catching them by surprise more and more, as if Horde's new leader knew they were being watched and had found a way to outwit them. Glimmer's leg had begun to thump frantically on the floor, as it always did when she couldn't calm down. She noticed Bow's arm around her shoulders, leaning her to his side affectionately. Glimmer looked up and met his warm smile. She sighed in resignation and closed her eyes, resting her head on his shoulder, allowing him to comfort her.

“Have we been able to find out who is behind it all at least?” Perfuma asked hopefully, “Maybe that will help us next time...”

Bow and Glimmer looked at each other with concern and turned their heads in unison. Beside Bow, Adora stood with her head bowed, without uttering a word. They had found her collapsed on the floor of an alley, sobbing inconsolably. Glimmer realized at once the reason for her friend's condition. Just before reaching her she had caught a glimpse of a motorcycle speeding away from Adora, and the abundant waving brown mane of one of the riders. She opened her mouth to answer but Mermista beat her to it.

“From the look on Adora's face we can guess who it is, don't we?” she said sternly. “It

was Catra, as we suspected.”

Adora was totally disconnected, unable to process what had happened, but she finally reacted when she heard those words.

“What...do you mean with “suspected”?” she looked at Glimmer and Bow confused. The guilty look on her friends' faces told her everything.

"Did you...did you know she was involved?" she said, raising her voice as she stood up from the couch.

“We weren't entirely sure, Adora, that's why we hadn't told you anything." Bow said in a conciliatory tone as he approached her. Adora ignored his words. She couldn't think.

“How long have you known?" she asked quietly.

Bow hesitated a moment to respond and looked at Glimmer. She nodded her head. It was foolish to keep hiding it from her.

“We suspected it the first time a couple of months ago, shortly after you arrived here," she finally answered. "In one of the first times we watched over them. We saw how she gave orders to a group that later turned out to be the one that assaulted the pyrotechnics warehouse. We didn't see her during the raid, that's why we didn't say anything to you, Adora.” Glimmer approached her and rested her hands on her shoulders. “We knew how upset you were about leaving her behind and we didn't want to hurt you”.

Glimmer's words felt like a stab in the back. She pulled away from her sharply, shaking her head.

“Adora, we are sorry. We shouldn't have kept it from you for so long...” Bow began, but Adora raised a hand to stop him.

She needed to get out of there. She couldn't think, she had to put her thoughts together.

“I can't do this right now, I...” she didn't finish the sentence. She yanked open the office door and left without another word under the guilty gaze of her friends.

Her breath condensed as it came in contact with the cold night air. Adora hugged her knees as she wrapped herself tighter in the plaid blanket she had grabbed before climbing onto the roof, in an attempt to get warm. She hadn't wanted to stay in her room, it was the first place Glimmer and Bow would look for her, and she needed to be alone, so she had opted to sneak off to her secret hiding place.

During her first month at ECS she had spent most of her free time wandering the halls of the academy. They had agreed with Angela that Adora shouldn't go outside the first few weeks just in case they were looking for her; as she was still a minor they had to formalize the paperwork to get her legal emancipation, so she had spent every spare hour exploring every nook and cranny of the facilities. Glimmer and Bow had done their best not to leave her alone, but in the moments when they had not been able to accompany her, she had preferred not to stay cooped up in her room. On one of her walks, she had come across some emergency stairs that led to the roof of the main building. From there,

she had a privileged view of the entire city, including Horde. Sometimes, on those nights when she couldn't sleep because the feeling of loneliness was too strong, she would go up there to relax. She wondered if Catra felt the same way. She missed her so much every time she crossed her mind, she felt a crushing pressure in her chest that wouldn't let her breathe.

She inhaled the night air deeply and exhaled slowly trying to calm herself. Although it hurt her that Glimmer and Bow hadn't said anything to her, she understood why they had done it. They were just trying to protect her, she knew. And she also knew they were sorry. She wasn't mad at them, she just needed some space to process it all. Because in reality, she was aware that what had really affected her the most were Catra's words; her look of contempt when she had begged her again to leave with her. She had lost her, forever. She noticed how a new lump began to form in her throat, and an involuntary sob escaped her lips, losing itself in the night in the form of condensed vapor.

"It's my fault" she thought as she buried her head in her arms. If she had stayed with her, if she hadn't left her none of this would have happened. She kept torturing herself with her own thoughts when suddenly she was alerted by the sound of the door opening behind her. She turned to see who it was as she quickly wiped away her tears.

"What are you doing here" Adora asked in a strained voice as Glimmer and Bow approached her and sat down next to her. "I thought no one else knew about this place," she mumbled.

Glimmer snorted and nudged her with her hip to make room for her under the blanket while Bow did the same on the other side.

"I've been sneaking up to this rooftop since I was five years old. I made mom think I was afraid of heights so she wouldn't look for me here when she wanted to ground me." she said with a mischievous grin.

"Always the modelic daughter" Adora commented with a slight smile.

"Of course" replied Glimmer, satisfied.

They fell into silence as they watched the evolutions of a night flight in the sky. The lights of the plane shone deceptively brightly, blending in with the stars that dotted the night. Adora shook her head trying to regain her train of thought and looked at her friends.

"Why did you come here?" she asked again after a while.

"We were in the mood for some shooting star gazing, weren't we Glimmer?" said Bow in an animated voice as he rummaged through the shoulder bag she was carrying and handed her a thermos for her to drink. It was filled with hot chocolate. Adora accepted it, grateful for its warmth. Her hands were freezing cold.

"I've come up here to make sure no one can ambush us" she retorted as she leaned on Adora's shoulder and closed her eyes. "From up here you can see for miles who is coming with bad intentions."

Adora let out a slight laugh. They had been like that from the beginning, tucking her in,

always trying not to make her feel alone. She knew why they were there, but they weren't going to tell her directly. Despite having been together for only a few months, the bond that had formed between the three of them was so strong that sometimes they didn't needed words to understand each other.

She let herself be carried away by their warmth as she felt the wind ruffling her hair. The weight in her chest was gone.

She was not alone.

"Thank you" she thought with a smile before closing her eyes.



