

CHAPTER 14: HOME

“Two pitchers of mead and a ration of cured pork, girl!” someone shouted from one of the tables at the back of the bar.

A chorus of mocking voices accompanied the order. The waitress was cleaning one of the tables, but she stopped immediately. She straightened slowly, frowning. The customers near her swallowed hard and hurried to hide in the pitchers in front of them as they sensed the upcoming storm.

“Who the hell are you calling girl?” she roared furious.

She was a young woman of medium height with wide hips and a rounded face with sweet features, although more than sweetness her gaze promised the fires of hell at that moment. She wore her short hair pulled back in two small braids, and she covered her pinkish hair with a rag, keeping her bangs in check so that they didn't fall on her forehead as she worked. Her tilted eyes narrowed dangerously as she gazed at the runt who had offended her. She put one of her hands on her hip while she pointed at him with the other one, warning him. The hubbub that had dominated the tavern was quieted somewhat by the anticipation.

“I swear on my mother, Talon, if you don't bite your tongue, you'll have to find you another hole to get drunk when your wife throws you out of the house for being a slacker.”

After a few seconds of silence the tavern erupted in laughter, and mocking the so called Talon, who could only hide his bearded face behind his empty mug while his companions slapped him on the back.

“Serves you right!” You know Glimmer is the queen of the place,” his partner said as he ruffled his hair.

Glimmer gave a satisfied half-smile and headed back to the bar, dodging tables with expert movements. Bow watched her from there, shaking his head with an amused expression as he dried the mugs he had just washed.

“One of these days you'll make us lose all our clients” he told her.
“Impossible,” Glimmer said as she leaned against the counter and pulled the rag off her head. Her forehead was drenched in sweat “Have you seen how crowded this place is? They love it when I put the idiots in their place once in a while,” she replied with some derision.

It was almost impossible to carry on a conversation above the din of deafening voices. Glimmer wiped her sweat and covered her hair again; the tavern was bursting at the seams, they were going to have to put out the fireplace despite the latest snowfall. It had been the last day of harvesting and the peasants had gathered there after a long day's work to celebrate. She smiled as a group of spontaneous people jumped up on a table and began to sing a very inappropriate bar song. Within minutes they were joined by half the tavern. There was a joy in the air that they hadn't seen for along time.

“We haven't had much reason to celebrate lately” Glimmer thought. She unconsciously brought



her hand to her chest, to the locket hanging around her neck, and squeezed it tightly, closing her eyes. The gesture did not go unnoticed by Bow, who placed his hand over Glimmer's and squeezed it affectionately.

"She would be proud of you," he said sweetly.

Glimmer gave him a sad smile as she pulled out the locket and opened it. Inside there was a picture of a beautiful woman with long wavy hair and the same slanted eyes as Glimmer.

"I know that. It's just...sometimes I remember how much I miss her and it's hard to breathe," she sighed sadly. "You don't know how much I wish she were still here," she closed the locket sadly and tucked it back under her shirt, right next to her heart.



Bow drew her to his side and pressed a kiss to her temple.

“We have lost too many people.” Bow muttered.

Glimmer nodded and rested her head on his shoulder, letting him comfort her.

The disease that had plagued the village for almost ten years had wiped out the bulk of the population. Each year it returned with greater force, but despite having been fighting the illness for so long, the latest strain had been particularly virulent. It had wiped out most of the elderly and some of the working adults...including Glimmer's mother, Angela. She had become infected while working in the makeshift infirmary they had set up in their living room. Angela had been the previous leader of the village, and she was not going to allow her people to die in the streets, so they had set up her house as a quarantine facility to keep the most seriously ill and treat them.

Glimmer didn't want to think about the last few weeks she had spent with her mother, it was too painful.

She still didn't understand how they had been able to hold out for so long. However, at the end of the previous year the situation had been desperate when the epidemic had been joined by the drought that had ravaged the place. In the last decade, one misfortune after another had hit them nonstop. Adora had no choice but to finally go out in search of help.

“There could have been more,” Glimmer said, “If Adora hadn't gotten help we would have all died, of disease or starvation, it doesn't matter.”

Adora had been away from the village for months, living in the castle that crowned the wates. She had ventured into those cursed lands in a desperate attempt to get help from her queen, even though it was believed that no one had seen her in over a decade. Glimmer and Bow tried to dissuade her from going there, but it had been impossible to get the idea out of her head.

“You're going into the lion's den and we won't be able to help you if anything happens to you,” Glimmer exclaimed. She had grabbed Adora by the shoulders to try to talk some sense into her, “That place has been cursed for years, no one who has gone into that forest has ever come back. You can't go there by yourself, Adora,” she told her desperately.

“It's just hearsay, Glimmer, as far as I know no one has disappeared from the village.” Adora said, resting importance to it. She stepped back and took a bag of provisions that she put in the horse's saddlebag. “Besides, they are supposed to be the royal family, they have an obligation to ensure the welfare of their subjects.” she turned to look at them very seriously. “They have neglected all of us for too long.”

Glimmer snorted in frustration and looked at Bow, who had remained silent up to that point.

“Say something!” she exclaimed.

Glimmer and Adora loved each other, but sometimes they we're unable to communicate with each other, and that's when he came. Bow sighed in resignation. Adora was a born leader, but sometimes it was hard for her to put herself in other people's shoes.



“Adora, we can't lose you too,” Bow had said, summing up what Glimmer was trying to tell her.

Adora had a retort ready but stopped surprised, unable to answer. She looked at them both in confusion. Glimmer on the verge of tears, her lower lip trembling, and Bow showing her a sad smile.

“Guys, I...” she started, but her voice broke and she couldn't continue.

Her eyes filled with tears and an involuntary sob escaped her. Glimmer hugged her tight, and Adora buried her face into her friend's neck. Bow smiled tenderly as they both wept disconsolately, babbling unintelligible words as they clung to each other as if the world were about to end. They were a pair of fools. He walked over to them and hugged them both.

“Nothing is going to happen to me, I promise,” Adora had told them with a choked voice when she managed to calm down, “Finding help is the only useful thing I can do now,” she looked at them and smiled. “Don't worry about me, really. I'll be back before you know it.”

But almost six months had passed and she had not returned. The only thing they knew about her was that she was well thanks to the letters she had sent them in the wagons with medicine and supplies she sent them from the castle. They were able to send her a couple of messages and she seemed fine. She had told them about the owner of the castle, Catra, but he couldn't say when she would be back. Glimmer hadn't had a good feeling about it and she almost prepared the wagon to go looking for her, but Bow had managed to talk her out of it. If Adora hadn't come back she must have her reasons.

A clatter suddenly interrupted the hubbub of the tavern. Glimmer and Bow turned surprised to see what was happening when, suddenly, the door burst open, almost flying off its hinges, and a draft of cold air blew into the room, blowing out the flames in the fireplace..

A sepulchral silence fell over the tavern when a shadow appeared in the doorway. The silhouette belonged to a petite girl with frizzy hair. The gloom made it impossible to make out her features, but she was breathing heavily and looking around frantically. Glimmer hurried to light a candle and approach her.

“Who is it?” she asked decisively.

The girl turned around when she heard her. Suddenly, in a swift, almost animalistic movement, she lunged at her and grabbed her wrists. Glimmer let out a startled exclamation, trying to pull back, but the girl wouldn't let her.

“Where is she?” she asked urgently.

She was about her age, shorter than Glimmer and with delicate features that were now disfigured into a desperate grimace. Her brown hair was completely tousled and her eyes were wild, one blue and the other gold. But what caught Glimmer's attention most were her unusually long fangs.



"Wh...who?" Glimmer asked confused.

"Adora!" the girl exclaimed, "Tell me where she is! I have to find her!" she said, almost losing her patience.

Glimmer watched her confused for a moment, until she realized who she was.

"You... Are you Catra?" Glimmer asked, "I thought she was with you." It didn't make sense, Adora was supposed to be in the castle and... her heart skipped a beat. "What have you done to her!" Glimmer shouted as she grabbed her by the lapels of her jacket.

To her surprise, the girl emitted an animalistic snarl and in one dizzying motion disentangled herself from Glimmer, knocking her to the ground and pinning her with her knees. Bow screamed her name, but Glimmer was paralyzed. The girl's fangs had lengthened surpassing her lower lip, and her eyes had turned crimson red. She leaned over Glimmer, hissing. She sniffed her as if trying to detect some kind of scent and let out a roar of frustration when she didn't find what she was looking for.



"I can't waste my time with you," she growled. She stood up suddenly and shot out the door, with the same speed with which she had arrived.

Bow rushed to help Glimmer sit up as soon as they recovered from their surprise. They looked at each other with worry.

Something was definitely not right.

The horse's hooves thundered on the frozen ground; it galloped at full speed through the trees covered with the last remaining snow of winter. The animal's agitated breathing condensed in contact with the freezing air, choppy with exhaustion, but its rider whipped it mercilessly to keep running.

"Faster, faster!" Catra thought.

It had been a mistake, she should not have gone down to the village to check if Adora was there. She had wasted precious time. But she couldn't trust Shadow Weaver, she didn't want to believe her.

The horse entered the thickest part of the forest, leaving a trail of snow and dust in its wake. The tree trunks were getting closer together, making visibility difficult, but Catra would not allow it to slow down even at the risk of breaking her neck in a fall. She continued to herd the animal, leaning over her mount as the landscape sped by beneath them.

She knew exactly where she was going, she remembered it clearly. She could still hear the laughter of her friends as they chased the lights coming out of the ground. Catra had found that clearing just a few days before and she had wanted to take them there. They were going to play princesses and bandits.

Her heartbeat matched the rumbling of the horse's hooves, increasingly frantic. She remembered the stairs, they had descended in the dark, excited for adventure and a pang of fear for the unknown; they advanced holding hands, stifling their laughter to avoid being overheard by the imaginary monsters that populated the dungeon. And then they reached the hall, a dark figure was waiting for them. And the laughter had turned to screams.

A whinny of pain alerted Catra, but it was too late. The horse stumbled over a fallen tree trunk and fell to the ground, dragging its rider with it. Catra managed to narrowly avoid being crushed by the animal; she twisted in the air in mid-fall and disentangled herself from the reins, leaping from the saddle and landing on all fours a few feet from her mount.

"No, no, no, no, no, not now..." she moaned desperate.

She rushed over to the animal to examine it. It didn't seem to have anything broken, but it was breathing heavily and its leg muscles were trembling. It couldn't continue.

Catra cursed and stood up. She wasn't quite clear on exactly which direction the temple was, so she decided to follow her instinct. She closed her eyes, focusing on her sense of smell as she tried to pick up Adora's scent. She caught a faint scent of jasmine drifting between two bushes in a particularly wild area, so she headed that way.

It was then that suddenly a wild howl pierced the night.

Catra turned around in terror, the hair on her tail standing on end. No, they couldn't still be



here. They were supposed disappear.

She was running out of time. If they found Adora they would tear her to shreds. The image of her dismembered, blood-splattered body overlapped with the faint pallor of Adora's face when she herself had attacked her not so long ago. Her blood froze in her veins.

And that mere thought set the beast free.

It was almost instantaneous, Catra had no chance to prepare herself. Her pupils narrowed, turning blood red. Catra felt her self-consciousness dissipate in a haze of blood and nightmares, and she felt an excruciating fear. She didn't want to, she couldn't lose control now. She wanted to scream, but a rising animalistic growl was now coming from her throat. She felt her fangs lengthening, saliva dripping from them onto the floor. Her hair stood on end, she felt her muscles tense as her fingers twisted into sharp claws, ready to tear. The beast hunched over, propping itself up on all fours, looking frantically around. Until it detected Adora's scent. A fang-curdled grin appeared on its maw as it licked its lips. The prey was going to be delicious.

The monster gathered momentum and burst into an explosive run following Adora's trail, while Catra tried her best to regain control of her body.









