

The War God's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 131

#131 The Path to Madness

Cassandra was torn. Between disgust, horror, and... compassion. A part of her was hearing Vrehan's story and seeing it through her own spectrum. Once pulled into the Dragon Empire, she had always thought there was something wrong with it. She had thought even more so when she had met Kairen, his mother, and heard their story. This Imperial Palace was the scariest place in the Empire. Filled with beautiful women, treasures, all the food and gold one could want, and endless rivers of blood. This kind of place wasn't an environment for children to grow up safely. It was a place for them to kill or be killed.

Her people had an expression for that. The river may not taste like the sea, but it doesn't get sweeter. No one could completely be free of its birth condition, and no child born from the Imperial Palace could be born without blood to be shed either. It was one endless circle of vengeance, jealousy and death haunting those golden walls. How could they path their own way of staying free of all violence in those conditions? Vrehan had undergone through his mother's madness and became the monster one woman's tortured mind could create.

"I have done everything... I became the best in everything!" He yelled. "I was the smartest child, the strongest, even the one with the largest beast, and yet, when this bastard came back, all this went for nothing. My Father only saw Kairen and his dragon, nothing else. None of us mattered. He gave him the best opportunity, the best chances. Even giving him an army, so he could come back after that victory and be acclaimed by anyone!"

Vrehan's anger came in every single word he spat. He had become about as red as his dragon and didn't bother to control himself anymore. Cassandra looked at him, standing a few paces away, but she was still nervously keeping an eye on the monstrous progeny also. Krai was growling in a low tone, but his arched back and visible fangs made clear

he was ready to attack as soon as she'd give him the word.

That jealousy between the siblings was no different from their mothers'. They all longed for their father's attention, and a chance to survive. Yet, Vrehan was the one who had gone too far, who had fallen into this hole without any chance of repair. Cassandra knew this tone of voice, it sounded like despair and madness, molten together.

"It was always about Kairen, the prodigal son, the War God, Kareen's son... Father was blind anytime that woman or her children were in the room. Even his damn sister mattered more than us, his sons!"

Cassandra remembered seeing Shareen stand like an equal of her brothers. She was the only princess allowed to do that, but part of it was because she had taken that right for herself. It wasn't Kareen or the Emperor who had given her a chance to talk and dispute her brothers, to stand above her sisters. The princess had chosen to stand her ground and become as strong as she needed to. She hadn't gotten favoritism, she had made her own space.

Shareen couldn't have gotten that strong or become able to discuss matters of the Empire on par with her brothers or her father's counselor simply because she was the favorite daughter. On the contrary, she may have become the favorite daughter because of everything she had become. Vrehan was simply blind and deaf to her actions, just like he was to his own sisters. He couldn't see a woman as a whole human being, only as a thing to be subjected to another man. To a father, a brother, or a son. Just like her mother, Shareen had long decided she was more than that. Cassandra didn't think that was simply her education that had molded her so, it was her nature.

"He didn't have to do anything, he always came first in every fucking thing! The minute he was born, that damn Kairen became the nemesis of my life!"

"...You're wrong."

After all of his vociferating, Cassandra's soft voice took him by surprise. The Second Prince looked at her, looking a bit lost for a second. He probably didn't think she'd even dare talk back, but there she was. The

young concubine wasn't even afraid. She was standing tall, backed up by the strongest dragon alive, and she was not about to step down. She wasn't impressed or scared by him.

Cassandra had found in herself the very same feelings she had the last time she stood in that arena. She wasn't afraid to die, she wasn't afraid to stand in the face of a man-killing monster. A lot of things had changed, and she

was stronger than before. She wanted to survive, this time, but she was also ready to give her life to save her loved ones. She wasn't scared in the slightest, a strange halo of quiet was with her.

"You're wrong," she repeated. "You saw what you wanted to saw.

Kairen never had it easy, none of your siblings did. You're talking as if he had cheated, but you're the one who took this for a game. You nurtured your own jealousy after what your mother had experienced. You could have ended it years ago. You could even have saved your mother, your sisters, but instead, you played this game of death and you had fun until you didn't."

Vrehan's face was getting more and more distorted with rage as she spoke. Cassandra's composure was even more of a slap to his face. He couldn't stand a woman talking back to him without any fear in her eyes and he couldn't stand her being Kairen's woman. He wanted to gouge her eyes out. Those eyes who looked at him like a pitiful thing, or a crazy animal. Those green eyes who judged him.

"You could have led a good life if you had stopped it," Cassandra continued. "Your mother was the one who went havoc, but you happily followed her into the madness and you even pushed all the blame on her. You used her. At least, she had her love for you and the Emperor as an excuse. But, you? You didn't have any real reason to do all the damage you caused. No one forced you to kill people, injure your sisters, or even fight your brothers. You could have spared many lives, but you just relished in your power until someone overshadowed it. It didn't even have to be Kairen or Shareen. You needed a bone to pick and you found one." 2

Vrehan clenched his fists and his teeth, so furious he looked like he was about to explode.

“You ignorant witch!” He shout. “You think you know the ways of the palace? Do you think you have any idea how cruel that world is? I was merely a child! I only followed in the path my mother had...”

“...I was a child too when I was captured,” said Cassandra in a very soft and low voice. “I suffered. I saw all the people I loved killed, tortured, raped, and sold by men I didn’t know. I saw dozens of young girls like me crying and suffering. I cried and I begged, too. I was whipped so many times, I thought I’d die. I was cut so deep I know the color of my own bones. I experienced the despair and the anger, too, and it did not make me a monster.”

The Second Prince looked at a loss for words for a few seconds. Then, he scoffed.

“You were merely a slave! You were insignificant, you were bound to be killed anyway! You couldn’t rebel! However, if you had the chance, just once, to hold the whip and torture the one who had done this to you, tell me you wouldn’t have done it! Tell me you would have remained all pure and innocent! Do you think I am a monster? We are all monsters then!”

“... No one held the whip for you,” retorted Cassandra.

He blinked, having lost what she meant. This time, Cassandra simply looked disgusted at him, and resolute. The Concubine shook her head and put her hand on Krai’s neck as she stepped forward.

“No one inflicted you such suffering, you’re the one who caused it. You mimicked your mother’s craziness. You don’t deserve to even compare yourself to any victim. You and I are not the same. You only inflicted pain on others, but you never suffered enough to know about that pain you caused. You just used it as an excuse to justify yourself.”

“I am the victim! I wasn’t born to be in someone’s shadow! It is my throne! No one knows what I went through, I did what I had to! Don’t judge me, you damn slave! You know nothing! I am the new Emperor,

the only one that matters!”

His madness was beyond saving.

Cassandra realized that as she watched him scream, shout and empty his lungs dry. This man had already sealed his own fate several times. There was no use in saving a fool running towards his end. Moreover, even if it wasn't for all those reasons, Vrehan was not one that could be saved.

Cassandra glanced towards the damaged dragons that were still growling at Krai. It was nothing pretty to see. Those things were never supposed to be created, yet they had been born out of one man's madness and a woman's suffering. The vision of Phemera's terrified eyes came back to her mind, giving Cassandra the conviction she needed.

“Enough,” she said. “It ends now. All of your madness, your schemes, and all the pain you inflicted on others.”

The Prince scoffed.

“Ha! Do you think you can stop me? You, the slave woman? The white witch? I knew you'd be a problem since Kairen saved you from this arena, I should have gotten rid of you faster... It's high time I get rid of you, you're an eyesore!”

Just as he yelled those last words, the dragons suddenly got more agitated, growling loudly and running towards Krai. The black Dragon didn't move, staying close to Cassandra, but when the young dragons reached them, he was ready. The sound of the first attack resonated throughout the arena. Cassandra dived down to cover her ears, as one of the dragons growled even louder right above her. A dragon's growl could be as soft as a purr, but it could become a deafening siren when they wanted to be heard. She rolled on the side, blinking through the dust clouds the gigantic bodies stirred. 2

So it had begun. She could hear Krai's anger unleashing, but she had to not stay around. She could be crushed at any moment by their weight, or get scratched by a dragon's claw if she wasn't careful. While Krai had done his best to protect her, he couldn't focus on Cassandra when he had to fight two of those dragons. She had to get out of there, as that fight

was bound to get messier. She struggled to get out of there, keeping an eye on the fight of all three dragons while not making the mistake to find herself in Vrehan's reach

She wasn't losing sight of the main enemy. Cassandra knew she couldn't match up to Vrehan in a fight, but she ought to not lose him a second time either. She had to find a way to end this...

The second Prince didn't look willing to fight yet. He didn't have a weapon, and his face still bore the horrible scar of the injury she had inflicted on him earlier. However, his dark eyes were absolutely burning with rage at her, and the deathly aura around him wasn't good either. Vrehan wasn't even bothered to look at how the dragons' fight was going. The gigantic creatures were making a deafening ruckus, yet he wouldn't glance. He was focused on one thing.

He stepped forward, making Cassandra shiver uncontrollably. She had gone out of the Dragons' reach, but she was only a few steps away from the enemy, and perhaps she would have wanted to fight the dragons more..

"You... Everything went off-track because of you," he hissed. "If you hadn't pushed those ideas into him... If you hadn't bore his bastard... 2
Cassandra glared at him, as she tried to get back on her feet. Her leg was horribly painful, and about all of her body, but hearing him insult Kassian gave her a new wave of courage. As he came closer, she grabbed some of the dust around her and threw it at him.

"Ah! You bitch!" He vociferated, rubbing his eyes and stumbling back. Cassandra took those precious seconds she had won to get back on her feet and hurry in a different direction, heading towards the cells of the arena. She didn't even have enough strength left to run. She was limping and exhausted. Cassandra tried hard not to look at the fight that was raging between the dragons, despite her concern for Krai. There weren't many doors open in the arena, but she had remembered enough from her short stay in the arena to remember which to take.

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#132 The Cells

She couldn't fight Vrehan, but she could win some time and even better, perhaps find a decent weapon to use. She remembered some of the shows had warriors fight between themselves. Though they were willing or not, they ought to get their weapons from somewhere; Maybe someone would have left some inside the cells...

Cassandra rushed there, trying to forget about death running after her.

She knew Vrehan would kill, probably slowly and painfully too. Kairen wasn't there to stop him, no one was. Her only nearby ally was a dragon, fighting the two horrid creatures inside. Cassandra knew she had to fend for herself. This time, there was no one to protect her.

As soon as she reached the cell, her memory came back vividly, like a nightmare hitting her. She remembered being dragged here like any slave. Being thrown in a cage, on the filthy ground, with no water and no hope to survive. The weight of her chains on her limbs and neck. She took a deep breath and chased her fear away

Those were nothing but empty cells now. The ground part of the arena was all stones, with only a few openings to bring in some light here and there. Prisoners destined to die had no use for light, there was only the bare minimum. Cassandra had to squint her eyes to find her way inside, to know where to go. She couldn't have remembered where exactly to go, everything in there was the same. Each cell was the same size as the other, the only change was its content.

A putrid smell hit her as she hurried between the cells. It was like everything in there was rotten and decaying, added to the excrement left there. She felt like throwing up. This was the absolute worst. Everything she saw looked filthy, yet she had no choice but to hold on to the bars to keep going without falling.

She heard the steps running after her, making her heartbeat accelerate.

Vrehan was closing in on her, following her. This was a horrible place to die, Cassandra couldn't fathom dying in here.

"I swear, once I get you, I'll hang your limbs on the Palace's gate for all

to see! No more of the white witch of the mountain!

His mix between her nickname and his hatred had something bitter about it. Cassandra barely listened to him, she was bent on finding her way out of there, any solution to survive this hell. Where were those weapons? She clearly remembered some people waiting to fight, and their jailers handing weapons to them! They were not slaves, but trained fighters, yet they had insisted on giving them different weapons, telling them something about the arena's security. Cassandra knew it was all a lie. She had heard some jailers snicker about the real reason for that later. They didn't want to let them have properly sharpened blades, but ones that would make the fights last longer, and get bloodier. It was horrible to think those people wouldn't even be granted a swift death.

Cassandra had no need for a properly sharpened weapon though, she didn't even have the skill to fight an Imperial Prince. Something that would at least allow her to defend herself would be enough. Anything. "You're so pathetic... You can't do anything without a man to protect you... You're nothing without him, just a slave. You should have died quietly like the rest of your filthy people."

Vrehan's words were echoing along the walls, like a shadow threatening to devour her at any time. There was so much echo, Cassandra couldn't even tell where he was, how far behind her. She didn't want to even think about it, fear slowed her down. Hope got her faster.

Finally, she spotted it. A pile of weapons, randomly thrown against a wall. Cassandra ran towards it, and started rummaging through the pile. She even cut herself a couple of times in her frantic search, but she needed to find one she could hold. Many of those were too heavy for her to wield, and she really couldn't afford another handicap while fighting the Prince off... Just as she heard his footstep get close, she settled on a little sword. It had a different shape from the one men used, it was thinner and lighter. She had no time to find another weapon, too. Cassandra kept pretending to look through the pile, but she was paying close attention to the sound of his steps. He was coming closer, and she

ought to be ready for it. She had to take him by surprise, that was her only chance.

She tried to calm her heart, and focus. She couldn't afford to panic now. She couldn't die like this, not here, not there...

"You damn witch, I..."

When he started yelling, she was ready. Cassandra dodged to the side, and in the same movement, turned around and swayed her weapon towards him. The Prince screamed horribly. She saw something fly away, but she had no idea what it was until she saw Vrehan's hand, covered in blood and missing fingers. (3)

"You... Bitch!" He uttered between his teeth.

She had managed to hurt him just enough he'd lose focus a few seconds. Cassandra retreated until her back hit a row of bars. She was against another cell, and for a second, despite the screaming, she heard something else. She turned her head, and surely, there was something in there. Something big, breathing very slowly. What she had taken for some airflow from the long corridors before was actually a breathing. A dragon's breathing. She felt a drop of sweat run down her spine. More of Vrehan's monstrosities? Or...?

"...Sire?" She called out.

The dragon moved. She could barely recognize the magnificent creature. He had lost so much weight! The blue dragon opened his eye to look at her, but she could tell the sadness in it. So this was where he had been. How did Vrehan even get the first Prince's Dragon in there? This cell looked so cruelly small for the dragon! 2

Cassandra extended her arm to try and touch him. She felt his scales, barely warm under her touch. The Dragon looked like he had given up on life... Just like Glahad when she had found him. They were bound to despair once their masters were gone.

She had not time to console him, though. Vrehan had lost a few fingers, but the red scales appeared quickly on his skin to seal the injury, and his

rage hadn't gone down after that. His face was so deformed by the anger and the injuries, he didn't look any more human than his horrible creations outside. Seeing him approach from her, Cassandra tried to get to the side, holding on to the metal bars to keep herself from falling. She heard Sire growl from behind her, recognizing her assailant too. The Blue dragon got a regain of energy from seeing the second Prince, its anger rising. Cassandra retreated until her shoulder hit a wall. She bit her lip, desperate. She was cornered between the wall and Sire's cell!

"Here we finally are..." Hissed the mad man. "A perfect place for you to die... In a filthy cell... It suits a slave!"

He raised his sword, and Cassandra raised hers, but he got rid of it in one movement. Just as she heard the piece of metal cling away on the stone floor, she crouched down just in time to hear his blade violently dig into the wall, right above her ear. She was completely cornered down, weaponless and her arms up to shoulder herself. Although Cassandra knew she just couldn't possibly resist another assault, this was futile resistance.

"You... You're finally going to die, you b...!"

This time, he didn't have time to insult her. Cassandra raised her head, feeling something hot dripping on her hands above her head. Vrehan was stuck in a shocked expression, a dragon's claw coming out of his throat. Cassandra was so shocked by that gruesome sight, she took a few seconds to realize his shoulder was pierced too. She slowly glanced to the side.

From his cage, Sire had suddenly jumped to stick two of its claws between the bars. Vrehan had been focused on Cassandra and screaming after her, he may have not even realized the dragon's presence in that darkness. There he was now, strangely pinned by Sire's claws. He began making horrible sounds with his throat, gasping for air and making some animalistic groans, as if he was about to cough his blood.

Cassandra covered her mouth with her hand. Was he going to...?

However, the dragon started getting agitated in his cell, and moving

around violently. Cassandra saw the walls behind them suddenly shaking under the pressure. Could he open this? If she managed to get Sire out, he could help Krai!

“Sire, keep pushing, please!” She yelled to him, while she ran for her little sword.

As the dragon had pulled back his claws, Vrehan was left holding the gaping holes on his throat and shoulder with his hands; Although the Dragon blood was trying to keep up to heal him, the pain had to be so bad he couldn't stand straight and stumbled to try and get to Cassandra. He was in a nightmarish condition, but his bloodshot eyes were clear about what he was about to do next.

The young concubine didn't even have time to be scared. She took her sword back, and when he approached, she held it up to defend herself. Vrehan had dropped his sword, but he was still coming for her, with his bare hands and clearly murderous intent. The situation was horrible, with the dragon going berserk behind them in his cell. Sire's cries and screeches were deafening as he threw himself against the walls of his cell. Cassandra, while slowly retreating, kept an eye on that wall. The gushes of dust coming out between made no mistake; that wall could be burst out by the angry dragon. It would just take a bit more...

“Uuuugh... You....”

It was all going to be about the timing... If she could survive, resist him just a couple more seconds...

Vrehan approached slowly, looking nothing human anymore. He was nothing but wrath, a monster begging for blood, covered in blood himself. She tried to hold her sword and agitated it in his direction when he came close. She silently begged Sire to hurry. She had one crazy idea, maybe her last chance to survive this...

“You... Die!!!”

He threw his hand at her, still missing half of his fingers, but Cassandra raised her blade right in time to protect herself; The second Prince violently cut his hand on it, making another horrible screech, and

grabbed the blade. A cold shiver ran down her spine as she felt no control over her weapon. Vrehan tore it away from her hands and threw it across the cell.

Cassandra realized she was about to die. Her eyes went towards the wall, and the bricks starting to give up. Even the roof above them was now spitting dust and little rocks, about to collapse...

She felt his hand suddenly grab her throat violently. She gasped for her, feeling the violent pressure of his grip. He was strong, so strong she was sure her nape was about to give in. She heard a furious growl somewhere far from them.

...inally..." he gasped with his throat still damaged.

The evil grin painted on his face, with his exhorting eyes and ravaged figure, was the worst sight to die to. Cassandra put her hands on his wrists, struggling, desperate to have him lessen his grip. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't feel a drop of air, and her lungs were painful already. Her throat was so painful, she felt tears in her eyes...

Suddenly, a horrible ruckus resonated behind them. She saw Vrehan turn eyes, panicked, right before the wall behind them started to collapse.

Cassandra closed her eyes, for a split second that lasted very, very long. She saw her son's adorable face, frowning like his dad and staring at his little dragon plushie. She saw Kian, jumping around the water, and running to Krai for play. She saw Shareen and Kareen, sitting together in a garden and laughing. And she saw Kairen, lying next to her in a bed, whispering some words she wanted to hear again.

Cassandra opened her eyes back, determined, and in a desperate attempt, she held furiously onto that wrist and pushed them both under the crumbling down stones.

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#133 The Silence

The Black Dragon and the other creature had interrupted their fight,

surprised by the sudden collapse of a part of the arena. For a long while, the bricks and rocks collapsed, more and more of the structure attracted to the fall. Soon enough, an impressive portion of the arena was wrecked open, some cells even open to the sky. Both dragons stared at the little mountain of rocks, and had to blink several times, annoyed by the clouds of dust that exhaled from it. Once it was over though, a long silence followed. For a while, nothing moved in the arena.

Krai softly growled, as if to call her. Next to him, the creature retreated back. Its sibling was already lying dead in the dust a few steps away, its rib cage exposed to the air. The fight had been horrible, the difference in strength showing off. Two of them hadn't been enough to fight the War God's Dragon. This little one wasn't sure what to do. It glanced at Krai, and retreated slowly, limping heavily on its injured leg. It seemed like the black dragon didn't care for their fight anymore. No, Krai was focused on the pile of rocks.

He slowly stepped forward, despite a painful and limping leg. He growled again, calling. Nothing moved for a while.

Then, the mountain suddenly rose, even bigger, and rocks rolled off to the ground. Blue scales starting appearing out of the mess. Sire struggled to get out of there. The dragon was injured and stumbled several times before he could get his body out of the rubble. Krai walked up to him, and both dragons briefly sniffed each other. Both dragon siblings were in a pitiful state. Krai had large injuries from his fight, covered in both his own blood and those of the dragons he had to fight today. So much, his black scales were shining with a lustrous red under the sun. Sire was covered in dust, but his body had been mauled in several places by the rocks, some of his scales had even fallen off or been damaged. His shoulder couldn't seem to bear the weight of his body, his paw kept giving away at each step he took to get away from the mess.

Just then, Sire suddenly turned its head towards the misshapen dragon left behind. The blue Dragon suddenly growled, his eyes shining of a murderous look. He started walking, growling furiously. As the larger

dragon headed its way, the ugly creature tried to retreat, struggling against its injury to step back. It had lost all of its intent to fight, the panic could be seen in its eyes as Sire came closer, growling furiously. The blue dragon, despite its injury and damaged scales, was in much better shape than Krai, and angrier too. The battle was about to end in a very quick way...

Meanwhile, Krai didn't even look at that massacre. His ears barely twitched, no matter how loud the younger dragon's screeches were. The black dragon kept staring at the rubble, like frozen in front of the pile of rocks. He didn't move, he was waiting, his ruby eyes looking over as if to look for something.

He growled again, softly. With his snout, pushed a bit the rocks, sniffing around to find her. He lifted his injured paw, starting to dig and move the rocks around. He was like a dog, looking through the pile, searching desperately. Behind him, Sire, done with his bloody work, watched him without moving.

“Krai!”

The black dragon didn't turn heads. He kept digging, his movements getting more impatient. His claws were not done for such a task, and he growled in frustration every time he ripped off a rock.

“Krai!”

Kairen was confused. What was his dragon doing?

The War God stepped forward, ignoring the pain. He was covered in black scales. His chest was bare and covered in scales and blood. A large portion of his face, too, was invaded with black scales, where the flesh was slowly recovering from the deep burn. One couldn't even distinguish the injuries anymore, his body looked like it was half-way some mythic transformation.

A wave of worry started invading his heart. His eyes glanced over the dead dragons near to Sire, but he just took the information in. He was more focused on Krai, digging helplessly through a mountain of garbage. Kairen started running. Panic was invading his senses. He threw the

dragon's head he was carrying, and just ran, as fast as he could, across the Arena. He had a bad feeling. He never had one of those things called intuition, but Krai's desperation was getting to his head like a horrible snake carving a fear. He didn't allow himself to think. Kairen ran until he arrived in front of the pile. Then, he started digging too. 3

For a while, there were no other sounds than those two, the Prince and his dragon, endlessly looking through a mountain of rocks, digging each way they could. They were looking so frantically, their breathing, and the ruckus they made was the only thing to be heard in the stadium. Sire, standing a few steps away, was looking at them with a quiet attitude.

"...What are they doing...?"

The blue Dragon turned its head to look at her. Stumbling at one of the Arena's entrance, Shareen was frowning with a grimace, in bad shape too. A large and deep injury was running from her left temple down to her jaw, still bleeding a bit, yet slightly covered by dark purple little scales. Her ear was cut open too on the same side and kept blinking because of the scales covering another cut on her eyebrow.

The top of her armor was gone, her shoulder exposed with another large injury on it, a clear gigantic bite mark that still bled down her sides. Her purple outfit was now drenched in a reddish color, and she was just walking slowly as if taking one step after another had been painful. She was holding her wrist against her flank, her hand gone.

She came closer, unable to understand what her brother and his dragon were doing.

They just kept digging, looking for a sign, a movement, anything.

"Cassandra!" Suddenly yelled Kairen, unable to retain it anymore.

His voice echoed along with the arena, and Shareen's face sunk.

"She can't be under... that..." She muttered.

tered.

The Princess hurried up to her brother's side, and though she didn't want to know what they were going to find, she started digging too, though it was slow progress. Sire looked at them as if they were crazy.

“Cassandra! Cassandra!”

The War God’s voice echoed his Dragon’s growls. They kept rummaging through the rock in silence of death. Shareen didn’t want to say those words, but she knew there was just no way.

Anything under this rubble couldn’t have survived this.

“Cassandra!”

She swallowed it and kept going. Rock after rock, they kept digging, hurting their fingers and breaking nails and claws until they bleed more. Suddenly, after pulling an umpteenth rock, Shareen saw it. A bit of white skin.

“K... Kairen...” She muttered.

Her brother didn’t hear her. Shareen took a deep breath, closing her eyes to hold it in.

“Kairen!”

This time, he turned around and seeing her expression, his heart sunk. The War God ran down the little uphill he was standing at two seconds before. His eyes opened wide upon seeing what she had seen.

“Cassandra!”

Shareen stepped away a bit, letting him uncover his lover. It was an arm that came first. She was covered in so many stones, it took a few more seconds to dig her out, even with Krai’s help. The Dragon was so agitated, the rocks under him threatened to collapse again. When Kairen finally pulled Cassandra out, he lost all of his breath.

She wasn’t moving.

Her eyes closed, she lied in his arms like an inanimate doll. Her white skin was covered in bruises, and her left leg was making a horrible angle, her feet lying at the end like it was just barely hung there. A layer of dust was

covering her skin, her hair as if she had been part of the stone itself. 8

The War God gasped, unable to admit what he was seeing, what he was holding on to. Something that he just couldn’t see was right under his eyes. His hands were shaking under Cassandra’s body. It had never

shaken before.

“Cassandra,” he called. “Cassandra, wake up.”

Shareen bit her lip, unable to say anything, not even tell him to stop. The young concubine looked beautiful, even in that state. Some of her hair was glued to her temple by the blood on her face. It had run all over her face, her lips tinted with some vermeil. Yet, her skin had never seemed so grey. She had never seemed so petite and thin, in the War God’s arms.

“No,” he said. “No, Cassandra, no.”

There was anger in his voice. As if he was ordering her not to. As if he was ordering them not to take her. Krai wasn’t making a sound. The dragon was crouching down, approaching with very little steps, as if he was... scared. He was sniffing Cassandra’s hand, lying on the ground, and slowly, he started retreating, with a wailing sound.

Shareen had to look away, she couldn’t take it anymore. It was painful to hear him, to hear them call her, again, and again, again, like a mad man. She couldn’t utter a word. If she did, she would have broken too. She was a strong woman, few things could shake her. This was one of those things. Cassandra, and Kairen breaking down. They were used to death, they had always been. But this was even sadder. Even more unbearable. This wasn’t possible to accept, not like that.

As she was looking away, Shareen’s eyes caught sight of something. A movement, underneath the pile of rocks. She frowned and walked towards that. As she came closer, a sound came with it, like a groaning of some injured beast.

“Oh, by the gods...” she hissed.

She pushed a couple of rocks with her feet, and sure enough, a black eye came through. He was moving, but those were merely tremors. The second Prince was groaning, pinned under a mountain of rocks. He didn’t look anything human anymore, his body crushed under the weight. His dragon blood was probably just doing whatever it could, on the inside and the outside.

Shareen didn't even have enough in her to grin at his pitiful situation. "Even the gods don't think you deserve an easy death," she muttered. Slowly, she took off one rock after another, until his head was completely stuck out. His skull had been crushed, his head in an odd shape that had nothing round. Yet, the red scales were appearing here and there. Shareen grabbed a rock that was about half her hand's size, weighted it a bit in her hand, and turned to him again. She approached her face to him.

"She killed you," she whispered. "...You're going to die knowing that a slave woman beat you, and another woman finished the job. You tell the gods if they dare send you back here again, I'll kill you over and over again, just like the damn cockroach you are, in any life."

Then, she raised the rock and smashed it on his face.

She raised it again and smiled with satisfaction. Then, she smashed it again. Just once wasn't enough. She had chosen a flat and not too heavy one on purpose. Shareen hit him again, again and over again, looking in his eye each time she raised it, putting all the violence she could in each hit. His dragon blood could try to keep up, she'd keep going. There was so much needed to be thrown into his face. All the suffering he deserved, everything, it

came from her hand, from that rock. The blood splattered around, on her hand, on her body, on her face. Her grip didn't lessen around the rock, no matter how it hurt to keep hitting. With each groan of suffering he uttered, she found a bit of relief, some justice was done to those who had died.

Shareen wanted to be sure he saw it, he died with this vision, knowing he had truly lost. She kept smashing his face, again and again, until nothing but a blood crater was left. Only then, did her shaking hand let go of the rock. It fell down, going down with a lonely sound on the ground.

Just then, the Princess let out a long sigh of relief. She didn't say a word, but for a second, she thought about her siblings, her brother, her nieces, and nephews. Then, Shareen grabbed the body, and with her last bit of

strength, she took it out of that graveyard, throwing it on the ground. Krai and Sire both growled furiously, but before they could react, Shareen took a deep breath, and suddenly, she spat out fire. The corpse started burning immediately.

That bastard didn't deserve anything to remain in this world.

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#134 The Words

Once this was all over, once again, everything became quiet in the arena. There was this silence, reigning over the place like a shadow despite the clear sky. It just didn't feel right. Shareen looked around, at the deserted arena. This place was desert most of the year, and when it was in use, it was to showcase death. Now, it had served its purpose one too many times. The Princess let out a long sigh. Maybe all of this was meant to teach them something. That it was time for a change, Shareen closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She wiped off the blood dripping down her chin, and with a heavy heart, she turned to her brother. Next to him, Krai was still waiting there, his head low, not moving. "Kairen. We have to go," she said.

While she was expecting her brother to ignore her, he slowly stood up, still carrying Cassandra against his chest. Both Dragons turned heads to watch him go, and they followed his steps as he slowly left the arena. Shareen watched her brother go, but she glanced one last time towards the ashes and the pile of rocks. She spat on the black dust and went to follow her brother and leave this place.

They walked slowly back towards the Palace. There were corridors to get there from the Imperial Palace, of course, and anyway, neither of the dragons looked like they had enough strength left to fly. Krai was following Kairen from up close, and even when he had to climb on the roof instead of the narrow corridors, his steps were heard heavily above them. Sire actually didn't follow them back inside. The blue Dragon

parted ways with them, aiming for another area of the castle. It was easy to imagine he had other humans to be more concerned about here.

Shareen didn't dare say a word while they walked. After such a long and violent battle, it was strange that everything was so quiet inside the Imperial Palace.

"Brother! We..."

Anour stopped talking, his eyes going down to the body Kairen was carrying. The young Prince opened his eyes wide, shocked, and soon, they got filled with sorrow.

"No... She..."

No one answered him. He gasped and covered his mouth, and didn't dare move when Kairen walked past him. The youngest prince raised his eyes towards Shareen, as if to ask something, but he didn't formulate it into words. She just glanced at him briefly, and they both followed the War God.

"The... fight outside is over," said Anour, almost whispering.

They could hear that. From very far above the Imperial Palace's walls, the cheers of soldiers could be vaguely heard. Shareen wanted to go out and slap them one by one. There was no cheering to be down now. Not after what had happened, the tragedy that was going on here. She didn't want to hear those idiots.

"...Where is Mother? And Missandra?"

"They are with Roun," said Anour. "Missandra is very badly injured, but Lady Kareen found an Imperial Healer to look over her, and Phemera, too... He said they will both make it. Everything was quiet here, so I came out to see... Lady Kareen had said we should hide and wait, just in... Just in case..."

Shareen nodded. Their mother had probably prioritized Missandra and the baby's safety...

"Can you go get them?" She asked.

Anour glanced towards Kairen, a bit worried, before turning back to her.

"Are you sure...?"

“I don’t...” She sighed. “Maybe ... It’s better if they get a chance to say goodbye.”

The youngest prince gulped down, looking like he was repressing some tears himself, and nodded vividly before leaving. Shareen sighed, and continued following her brother. She didn’t know where he was taking her, she couldn’t even tell if he had a destination in mind.

Kairen looked like he was wandering aimlessly in the Palace’s corridors, carrying her body in silence. Just after a few more corridors, she recognized the direction they were taking; Towards the lake. (4 She frowned. They had heard some incredible story from their brother while on their way to the arena, but... What was he thinking, going back there? That crazy tale Opheus had said uttered about some gigantic Dragon hidden the lake couldn’t be true... was it?

Shareen didn’t say a thing, though, and still followed after him. No matter what he tried, said, or did now, she probably wouldn’t have found it in herself to stop him. She had never stood against her brother, and she wouldn’t do it now. Certainly not now. They walked up to the Lake, where Opheus was seated in the grass, a hand on his . dragon. Both Lys and Glahad looked exhausted, covered in injuries, yet they all raised heads once they walked in the garden. 3

The Golden Dragon growled softly, but Glahad couldn’t move. He was exhausted and lying on its flank. He had fought a lot today. They all did. Krai too, walked heavily on the grass, walking to Kairen’s side. The Black Dragon had never looked so sad when it laid down there, its head turned towards them.

Opheus struggled to get up, but his eyes were riveted on Kairen and Cassandra. He didn’t say a thing, but his expression was beyond words. That sight had rendered him speechless, choked up, at a loss for words. He watched his older brother get to the lake, and get down on his knees on the strand. He was holding Cassandra as if she was simply sleeping, her head against his neck, his large hands holding her as tenderly as a man could hold a woman.

“Please.... 4

His voice was so low, Opheus thought he had dreamt it. Yet, Kairen was staring at the Lake, his eyes searching for something he couldn't see. He didn't know what to call, how to do this. It was Cassandra's world, not his. He knew nothing. The War God took a deep breath, and after a hesitation, he uttered the one word he knew.

LIE

W

...Almien.” 14

He looked at the lake, but as nothing moved, he took a deep breath and repeated it. Again and again, like a prayer; He hugged Cassandra, and begged for her God to come and save her.

Shareen was staying behind arms crossed, looking like she believed nothing of what he was trying to do. Opheus glanced at the surface, unsure. Would that creature answer to their call? After what they had done? He looked at Cassandra. After they had done this to her? To her people? He exchanged a glance with Shareen. The Princess didn't believe it, but she wouldn't stop him from trying. She knew there was nothing else he'd do but try. 2

“Oh, by the Gods... Cassie...”

They turned around.

Lady Kareen had arrived, carrying baby Kassian and followed by Anour. Somehow, Kian had found his way to the concubine and was walking at her feet, looking just fine, unaware of what was going on. They had come without Missandra, which meant the younger sister was probably in no state to move. In a way, perhaps it was better, Shareen thought. She'd be spared of that vision of her older sister, lying lifeless in the War God's arms...

In his grandmother's arms, Kassian began crying. Kian, too, retreated, no longer looking all joyful and excited. The young dragon was almost hiding behind Kareen, sending little glances towards the lake, and making little distressed sounds. This scene was just unbearable. Kareen

didn't even try to soothe the baby, the Imperial Concubine had her eyes riveted on her son, looking completely devastated. She sighed, and held Kassian a bit more closely, caressing his back and whispering gently to him. She kept shaking her head, not adding anything.

Suddenly, something on the surface of the lake began moving. They all turned their eyes towards the shapes that appeared in the water. The ripples started spreading through the whole lake, and somehow, the atmosphere around got a lot fresher too, which never happened in the dry, hot Dragon Empire.

Shareen and her mother exchanged a glance, completely stunned. They had lived years in this Palace, known every end of it and even every secret of the Emperor. Yet, its biggest secret didn't belong to the human realm. It came into the shape of a magnificent Creature that surfaced out of the lake for a girl.

The Water God let the top of its body out of the water, its head coming to Kairen. It was like a snake slowly swimming, chunks of its body appearing randomly on the surface, and disappearing again. One could only imagine the actual length and size of that creature. Opheus glanced towards the dragons, but none of them looked cautious or surprised. They were all lowering their heads. As if the one water dragon in front of them was a very venerable creature, a being they were intimidated by naturally. They hadn't done that earlier, in the midst of a battle, but now, there was a clear line drawn between the Imperial Dragons, and this Water God. Kairen raised his eyes as the Creature stood tall above him. For once, the War God was the one looked down upon, and he didn't care the slightest about that.

His dark eyes were red with grief. He just didn't want it, he didn't want to admit that reality. Yet, as the Water God stood tall in front of him, he remained quiet. There was a very strange feeling between the two.

He was holding Cassandra, so light in his arms. The girl from the Rain Tribe. The slave his Empire had taken from her people, from the life she should have had. They should have never met. They were born in

different worlds, worlds that weren't suited for each other. The moment she had been brought to this Empire, she wasn't meant to survive. She was brought to this Empire to suffer and die. To become a slave.

Yet, of all people, the War God had fallen for that woman. There had been a bit of light for her, in the darkness. They hadn't spent a year together, but she had become everything. She had become what she could be, like a flower struggling to bloom in the dirt. The water lily. The Lady of The Mountain. Wherever she had been taken, she had done her best to survive and grow. She hadn't complained, she had stood brave against everything his people had thrown at her. She had never become resentful towards their people. Cassandra had stayed the same girl from the Rain Tribe, and she had changed the people around her instead.

Kairen was sitting there, looking at the Water God and lost.

What had he come to do? Beg for a second chance? For Cassandra to be returned to her? He was sitting in front of her God, with her body in his hands. What would he dare beg for? The Water God had heard the Requiem of one of his last daughters. No one could tell what linked them, but he was presenting her body to that God, and begging for a second chance? To take her again, back into this terrible world? How could he ask for a miracle, when nothing had been brought but Chaos?

The Water God was standing there, waiting. No one could tell how much time really passed, with those two Gods staring at each other. It was like some silent negotiation was going on between them, yet no word was exchanged.

In Kareen's eyes, her son was paying a heavy price for many, many people's wrongs.

He was the one carrying his lover's body. The mother of his son was lying in his arms, and he had to live with the fact that not only had he been too late to save her, but he was also partially guilty for it. Because he had fallen in love with her, so many things had happened. No one could tell how and why the Black Dragon had tied their destinies together.

Maybe the War God needed to learn about love. Maybe it was just about giving Cassandra more time to do all the good she could still do. There was something both beautiful and tragic about this pair's fate.

After a long while, the War God closed his eyes. One tear slowly went down his cheek, and with a deep breath, he held Cassandra in his arms one last time. He hugged her tight, burying his face into her hair, his hands wrapped around her body. From behind him, they could feel the heavy weight on his shoulders, the mountain of pain and grief that overcame him. Only his son's cries could be heard, the man himself was beyond tears.

Then, very slowly, he laid Cassandra's body down in the water. Even from afar, one could tell how unwilling he was to let go. When his hands finally left her body, he took a couple of steps back, his eyes still on her. Never the obsidian eyes had been so dark, without a spark of light in it.

He raised his dead eyes to the Water God, and then, he bowed very lowly. Kairen had never bowed to anyone, but now, that man was thrown so low, his face almost touching the water.

"I'm sorry."

Those three words were uttered so low, no one else heard it.

The Water God let out a long, low-pitched sound that resonated within the gardens and beyond. It was as if he had been waiting for this. Then, he went down to Cassandra, his head right next to her, and the creature took a deep breath in.

When it opened its mouth, it exhaled some very thin, white dust. As they were confused at first, they realized that white smoke slowly covered Cassandra. The air chilled down again, and the ice got thicker. Soon, her skin turned whiter than it had ever been. It was like seeing a ghost disappear in the snow. Her lips became purple, then blue.

Kairen couldn't take her eyes off her until the Water God stopped his ice breathe. Then, with another, angrier loud growl, it suddenly came closer and wrapped his body around Cassandra. One of its paws grabbed her

arm to keep her in place, but the Creature's eyes were on Kairen all of the time. The War God didn't even seem to notice, and he didn't even retreat from the Creature so close. He just watched it take her.

With another long growling, the Water God slowly went back into the lake, taking Cassandra with him. It disappeared just like this, and after a while, the surface of the water didn't move at all, going back to being a quiet, peaceful lake.

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#135 The New Age

Shareen sighed.

So this was over. Whatever that thing was... It had taken Cassandra's body with it, deep down the Lake. Once again, Shareen let out a long sigh, unable to name her feelings right now. This was just... too much to handle. She glanced towards her mother. Lady Kareen was looking at her son with the saddest expression on, but she didn't go towards him. It was like she knew, there were no words she could say that would help him in any way. She glanced down at Kassian, who was still crying a bit, though the baby seemed too tired to be wailing anymore.

Anour and Opheus had the same horrified expression on their faces.

Everyone was staring at Kairen, left alone to face the quiet lake. No one knew what to do next.

Krai was the first one to move. The Black Dragon walked to his master's side, and curled up around Kairen, not moving anymore. It seemed like Dragon and Prince were one being at this moment, facing the quiet lake, united in their loss.

That sight seemed to wake Shareen up. She shook her head and walked to her mother.

"I'll go take care of the crap outside, make sure we are done with everything... whatever there's left."

The Imperial Concubine let out a long sigh and nodded. Her eyes went

down on the baby in her arms. She left a long kiss on the baby's forehead, while at her feet, Kian curled up around her too, his eyes turned towards the Lake. It looked like the baby dragon was confused about what had happened, and didn't dare go. Instead, he stayed with Kareen, who patiently waited for her son to get out of his slumber. No matter how long it would take...

Opheus and Anour walked up to Shareen. The fourth prince had to wipe his tears, a bit shaken up. They hesitated before saying anything, almost embarrassed to even utter a word right now.

"What now...?" Asked Anour.

"You'll stay with Missandra and Phemera."

The Sixth Prince's expression sunk.

"But... if she wakes up..."

Shareen glared at him.

"If she wakes up, you'll tell her the truth, Anour. Stop being such a baby, or we can switch and you will be the one to take care of the fucking mess outside or the politics. Your pick."

He looked down defeated. Indeed, he was the one closest to Missandra, and wouldn't be able to help anywhere else... It didn't make his task any easier, though. Anour nodded, having no more reason to discuss. Then, with a sigh, the youngest prince glanced at Opheus and left with a sad expression on.

The fourth Prince crossed his arms.

"You went a bit harsh on him..."

"I'm not in the mood to indulge anyone's little sensitivity right now."

Her brother grimaced a little, glancing towards Kairen and the lake.

"I can't blame you... Lephys is dead. What do you need me to do?"

"Gather all those damn ministers, counselors, whatever. It is high time for some things to change around here, and it starts today."

"...Do you think they are going to listen, though?"

"They listened to that rat. So now, either they have a very open ear for us, or those bitches can join him in hell. I'll send them there myself. They

should start working now if they want us to let them live another day after what happened here. Those damn... Tsk. Anyway, you can bring Lephys' body if they need to be convinced. At least that bastard would be useful for something..."

"Got it."

They split up to take care of everything that was left after the battle. Once those three had left the garden, everything went quiet again in the area. Kareen was left alone to contemplate her son's lonely figure. In her arms, Kassian had given in to slumber and was sleeping, his little eyes still red from all the crying. His grandmother sighed. The poor boy had no idea what a hero his mother had become. Cassandra had never been a warrior, she was only one who could give herself to others. In the end, she had given her life to save theirs...

"Don't worry," she whispered. "We won't let you forget her..."

A long time passed like this in the garden. Nothing really moved, except for the wind blowing gently on them. Kareen, tired to stand, walked across the lake and came to sit near the poor Glahad. The old Golden dragon put its head against her lap, his ruby eyes on the Concubine. She sighed and caressed him.

"That old man... He even had the guts to go before me... So heartless. Don't worry, Glahad... This old woman will stay with you a bit longer. Just a bit longer... He was ever so selfish, wasn't he? That poor man. At least you will stay with me a little bit longer, won't you? To watch over the children. He's left them nothing but a mess..."

The golden dragon growled softly, and closed his eyes, gently rubbing his face against her hip. The elder dragon looked incredibly tired. Kian, who had been left a few steps behind, walked to them slowly and curled up under Glahad's wing. Like a little ball of silver scales, the baby stuck himself against the old dragon, lowering its head with a sad look. From there, his little emerald eyes could watch Krai and Kairen, on the side of the lake, not moving.

He stayed there for a very, very long time. He was simply staring at the

surface of the lake. He wasn't expecting anything. Kairen had nothing reflected in his eyes, as if he was simply left there. Abandoned. Down on his knees, he just didn't move. Man and dragon remained there like lonely statues until the sun came low and the sky turned orange. It was as if time had stopped in this garden only.

One could hear voices, somewhere else in the Castle, as their world was resuming its course again, without them in it. Somewhere, Shareen was discussing with the Imperial Generals, giving orders to clear up the streets and leading the capture of the traitors. Opheus was threatening the council, clearing up the bad money that had circulated and deciding who had a chance to redeem themselves or not. His dragon Phe had left the garden, limping to go and help him on another side of the Palace. Anour was trying to handle a girl crying and grieving her older sister. Life just couldn't resume peacefully, not after Chaos had been spread around the Palace like this.

Kassian woke up during that time. A baby didn't know much about wars, but he knew when he was hungry. He started whining a bit in Kareen's arms. To her surprise, just as she was about to soothe him, across the Lake, Kairen finally left his slumber and stood up.

While his dragon didn't move, the War God silently left the shore and walked around to come to his mother. A bit surprised, Kareen stood too and waited for him. He didn't look like anything he was earlier that day. Something was broken inside, she could see it in his eyes. It wasn't about the injuries or the tiredness. When he came to her, his eyes went directly to his son, and for a second, there was a spark of light in there. Kairen gently took Kassian in his arms, and the young baby stopped crying, only sobbing a bit. He wiggled a bit in his father's arms, as if to look for a more comfortable position. The black scales still trying to heal Kairen's body probably weren't too agreeable for him, but he still didn't complain much. His dad's warm skin was enough to calm him down.

Kairen spent a long time staring at his son, the little boy in his arms.

“...What do you want to do now?” Gently asked Kareen.

“...She hated this place,”

The Concubine slowly nodded. It felt right he wouldn't want to stay here with Kassian, not after all of this...

“I understand. I'll help you the best I can.”

He didn't reply. His eyes were still on his son. He gently caressed Kassian's forehead with his thumb. The baby squirmed a bit, pouting. Kian, too, went from Kareen's side to Kairen's, staying at his feet quietly. The War God just seemed tired right now. A man who had fought a war and lost more than he had won. It was all written in his eyes. It may even have been worse if he didn't have his son to hold on to.

“How about you go to... The Residence, for now?” She suggested.

“They have everything needed to take care of Kassian.”

He nodded slowly. That's all she needed. Although she was going through her own mourning right now, Kareen knew it was without common measure to her son's sorrow. After a hesitation, she raised her hand and gently, touched his arm.

It was a light pressure on his skin, just for the contact of it. For him to feel she was there. She'd always be there for him.

“Go,” she said. “Your sister can handle it. I... I'll join you soon.”

Just like this, she watched Kairen go, carrying his son and his grief. Kian sent her glances, a bit unsure, but the younger dragon eventually followed his master, looking up at Kairen and scurrying right behind him. She watched him go until he was out of sight and then, she glanced towards the lake.

Krai was still there, lying down by the water. He hadn't moved at all. The dragon was exactly where his master's heart had been left. No one could tell if he was waiting, or had simply been abandoned. The Black Dragon was as frozen as a statue, his ruby eyes reflecting nothing but the lake. He didn't even seem to be alive anymore. Kareen's heart broke once more for her son's dragon. He'd remain here forever, she could

foresee it. The Imperial Concubine repressed the cries of her heart to walk out of the garden.

She hated this place too.

Kareen had seen too many children breathe and die within those walls. If a new age had finally come, it would happen without her. She was an old woman who had no strength left to give. She would no longer be the untouchable Imperial Concubine, if she had ever been. Nothing was keeping her to this place, it had never been. Next to her, Glahad growled softly, pushing against her hip a little. She smiled faintly, caressing the golden snout again.

“Do not worry... Wait for me. I still have one thing to do here. Then I’ll take good care of you.”

The Dragon growled again as Kareen walk out of the garden. She took a different direction his son had taken, heading back to the place they had stayed hidden at for a while. As she came closer, she could hear the screams. Missandra’s wailing was unbearable to hear after all this, but Kareen took a deep breath in and continued. She didn’t flinch upon hearing the younger sister’s distress, or Anour’s attempts to calm her down. No one could blame her, after she had lost her older sister in such a horrific way. Missandra was crying, like any child needed to cry a loss.

Kareen felt sorry for the girl. They were a lot alike, in a way. Though she loved Cassandra a lot, the Imperial Concubine could see a lot of herself in the younger sister. Hence, she also knew Missandra would recover and get stronger with this experience. They were the type of women who always grew stronger to survive, turned the anger and the fear into rage. She only hoped Missandra would be able to open her heart again despite all this. That child needed to learn how to love and trust people again.

Kareen hadn’t come back here to console Missandra.

She took a deep breath and opened a room that had stayed locked until now. Inside, Phetra was there, tied to a chair, her face ruined by her cries. Her eyes had grown wide and red with terror. Maybe she knew what had

happened to her brother. As soon as she saw Kareen, her panic increased. Despite being gagged, she started wailing loudly and trying to move out of her chair.

The former Imperial Concubine was incredibly calm, though. She came close and untied the ribbon they had used on her mouth. As soon as she could, Phetra started begging and crying.

*Please! Please spare me! I didn't want to! Vrehan forced me! I knew he'd kill me if I didn't obey! I had no choice, I had to obey! I didn't want to! I didn't want to!"

"Who else was working for him?" Asked Kareen calmly, ignoring her plea.

"I... I already told Opheus the truth, I swear! I didn't want to help him! He... He made me sleep with all those dirty old men! He forced me to!"

"What about your sisters?"

Phetra seemed scared, but she was like unable to stop. She could barely breathe under her loud sobs.

"I... I only taught the young ones to follow orders! We had to! I didn't..."

Kareen let out a long sigh.

"You're just a pathetic thing, aren't you?"

Although she said that, Kareen took out a dagger from the pockets of her dress, making Phetra go into absolute hysteria.

"No, no, no! Please! I don't want to die, I don't want to die!"

"No one wants to die," retorted Kareen. "No one wants to kill either, but here we are, you and I. We just have things to protect and dirty our hands for."

She killed Phetra in one swift movement.

The princess fell off her chair, her throat sliced open. Phetra's eyes were still twitching, her face in the blood as she died with that vision of her own blood flowing out. Kareen stepped back to avoid being stained, and slowly wiped the blood on her dress. With this, it would truly be over.

She simply walked out, closing the room behind her. Then, Kareen took a deep breath and walked back inside the Palace. She could already feel this wind of change that was overtaking this place's filthy air. Her steps took her to a different aisle. No one was there yet. Everyone was already busy with whatever was going to come next. Kareen opened the door to the Emperor's Chambers.

He was lying on his bed, his eyes closed. From afar, one could have thought he was simply sleeping. Kareen took a deep breath, trying to hold back her tears. She slowly walked up to the bed, watching him from above.

"You were really selfish to the end..." She whispered. "Leaving me and your children with that mess... Was that what you wanted? To die with all the trouble you had caused, you old man? You could never abandon a single one of them, and yet, look where it took you... Blood and jealousy. Was it worth it, trying to protect them all? You..."

She stopped. The sadness was growing like a knot of frustration in her throat. Kareen was too proud to cry, but she couldn't simply stand in front of her deceased lover like this. She had once loved this man. She had given him many, many nights before the lives they had created together had come first.

She stepped back, closing her eyes. She was simply grateful he hadn't died alone, although no one could say the Emperor had died in peace. She simply wished he could find some rest in the Gods' Realm, and watch what was to become of this Empire. Kareen took a deep breath, and as she took her gaze elsewhere, her eyes fell on a large door. She frowned and turned to that wardrobe. She couldn't remember what was behind that door, but something felt nostalgic.

The Concubine slowly walked up to that wardrobe, and as she came closer, she noticed her name, carved into the wood above the handle. Kareen frowned, and slowly opened that door. There was a single piece of clothing inside.

A magnificent golden dress.

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#136 The End

It was a dark and quiet night in the Palace.

The moon was floating in the sky, bright and white, shining gently. Her beautiful light was reflected on the surface of a wide, quiet lake. A magnificent black dragon had her light reflected on its scales too. He seemed to be sleeping, its head peacefully rested on its front paws. That Dragon had been there and immobile for a very long time. That night was only one of many, many others he had seen in that garden. On the surface of the lake, dozens of flowers were gently floating, just as pure and white as Water Lilies.

A little ripple appeared in the middle of the lake, making the flowers drift away slowly.

It could have been a little breeze of the wind, sending a gentle blow of fresh air on the surface of the lake. It could have been a fish, tempted by an invisible fly, or one of the delicate little fireflies that were living there. Yet, the black dragon raised its head. The ruby eyes, glowing in the darkness of night, were looking for something on the surface. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, he slowly stood up, came closer and sniffed the water a bit, unsure. Its tail started wagging the air gently. Then, more ripples appeared. The water moved a bit more and then, at the center of those ripples, some brown curls appeared at the surface. Slowly, the woman emerged from the water, gasping for air, her pink lips shivering a bit. The black dragon jumped into the water, splashing its surroundings to run to her. She welcomed him as soon as he arrived, opening her arms. ?

“There, there... You missed me, didn't you?”

The black dragon growled softly, rubbing its head against her beautiful white skin. She smiled, feeling her heart warming up again as she felt its warm scales. She found the dragon's favorite spot underneath its jaw and scratched it. The Dragon growled softly as a cat would purr.

“I missed you too... I missed you all.”

The black dragon kept growling happily and stayed right by her side as she slowly stepped out of the lake. If it had any colors before, her dress had lost them all to turn a beautiful white, with all the pink little beads shining like little diamonds under the moonlight. With her pale skin and thin body, she almost looked like a ghost, a beautiful one coming out of the water. Leaning on the black dragon a bit, she stepped onto the grass, her feet bare. She looked around.

“...Everything is so quiet. I wonder how long has it been...”

Even though it couldn't answer, she smiled at the dragon as if it had. He was rubbing his head continuously against her, completely enamored, move living that it had been in months. She chuckled.

“Alright, alright... Shall we go now?”

The Dragon growled softly, and she climbed on its back easily. Krai barely waited until she was properly seated to take off. She felt the familiar thrill in her stomach as they got higher in the skies. It was a clear night, so clear she could observe all the streets underneath. It ought to be late for everything to be so quiet in the Capital.

The time to observe was limited, though. The Dragon was in a hurry and flew high and fast in the sky. The beautiful woman on his back took a deep breath. She couldn't feel the cold anymore, but she could feel the fresh air filling her lungs, making her chill. It was so nice to be able to breathe again... She closed her eyes, letting her senses feel the ride for her. It felt amazing, to be able to come back like this. She could feel the wind riding on her skin, blowing her curls gently.

She didn't even feel how long that trip really was. When Krai started flying downwards, she just smiled happily. She could recognize the lonely Shadelands just so easily. A few things had changed. A few more trees sprouting, and the snow. It was fresh, the clouds gently snowing on the lands. Was it winter here already? She could only imagine so. It felt strange to witness this all from above.

Once again, everything was quiet here under the darkness of night. Even

when the black dragon gently landed in the snow, nothing else moved. Yet, her heartbeat was going crazy with anticipation. She wanted to run upstairs, to rush to them. Yet, she was feeling a bit shy as she got down from the dragon. Cassandra gently caressed Krai's scales, thanking him silently. He had always been the first to come to her... Krai was reluctant to part with her, but it growled softly when she walked inside.

It felt like she hadn't been here in ages, yet everything was just as she remembered. Slowly getting up the stairs, Cassandra was sliding her fingertips against the cold black stone of the Onyx Castle. She liked this place, so lonely and in a quiet place in this world. One step after another, she felt her heartbeat go insane with anticipation.

Suddenly, as she reached another floor, something silver jumped in her arms.

“Kian!”

The little dragon was growling softly, and completely snuggling against her, rolling its long body around her neck and shoulders, rubbing its head against her skin. Cassandra smiled, caressing him as she kept walking. He had grown so big already! The young dragon probably had no idea but its size was twice what she remembered, and he was heavy on her shoulders. Cassandra caressed him but she just had to keep going. She could hear the giggles, and sure enough, she found him in that little room. Her face illuminated as she found the little boy, standing in his bed, it's little hands holding on the rail, and smiling wild at her already. Kassian was giggling and jumping, a bit excited. Cassandra felt her heart go crazy upon seeing her son's face again. He had grown so much already! She felt a couple of tears run down her cheeks as she ran to him.

“Oh, my baby... Kassian...”

The baby was excited to see her and kept hopping until she finally got a hold of him. Kian jumped down, leaving space to take her son into her arms. Cassandra couldn't believe it. He was already able to stand up, and smile and grab her hair in his tiny hand. He was so small the last time she had seen her son... Kassian hadn't

forgotten her, though, or maybe his dragon's instincts were kicking in. He snuggled into his mother's arms, happy and holding on to her. Cassandra was happy to see him looking so well. He was starting to take some of his father's traits, and some of hers too. He had dark brown hair, and his green eyes were the same as hers... She liked his smell too. Her baby's smell... She hugged him for a very long time, kissing his little face until he laughed from being tickled this way.

“Da... dadaaa...”

“It's Mama, love. Your mom is back.”

“Mama...” Repeated Kassian, looking at her curls in his hands with a cute frown that mimicked his father's.

“Your dad took good care of you, didn't he?” She smiled.

“Dada!” Exclaimed Kassian.

“That's right, Kassian, your dad...”

Cassandra smiled, but she could see her son was tired. It was the middle of the night, and he was too young to be up this late. Kian had probably woken him up as he felt her arrival, but now, the little silver dragon was curled up on one end of the toddler's bed, and Kassian was struggling to keep his eyes open, too. She kissed his forehead and put him down as he starting falling asleep. Her heart couldn't bear to part with him so soon, so she stayed a little while longer, to watch him sleep. He did look like a happy boy... She felt relieved a little. He wasn't too old yet, and had grown beautifully meanwhile. Cassandra took a glance around. His bedroom wasn't too big, but it was filled with toys, all sorts of toys. He even had a little castle, and a big dragon plushie. Cassandra smiled, recognizing the little one in his bed. That forgotten treasure she had clumsily stitched back to shape a long time ago... So this old thing had really come to him...

After a while, she just couldn't bear it anymore. She turned to leave the room, letting Kassian sleep and following her heart elsewhere. The few steps to the next bedroom were enough to make her heart race again. She stayed a second on the doorstep. That door had been removed, surely so

he could be closer to Kassian... Cassandra's heart started burning. He was alone in this large bed. Half-naked, the retired War God was sleeping there, his face towards the window. Seeing Kairen again left her breathless. He was frowning slightly even in his sleep as if he was having some unhappy dream. She wanted to run to him and yet, some strange shyness was keeping her from it. Cassandra had her heart on the edge of her lips, almost pouring out. It was too much. To see him again, after all this time...

She stepped forward, so nervous she felt dizzy. She wanted to run to him, but her legs felt weak. Cassandra walked slowly instead, surprised he wasn't waking up....Or was it because it was her?

"...Don't."

Cassandra froze. His eyes were still closed, but he had very clearly spoken right now, making her heart miss a beat. She opened her lips, unsure.

"...Don't torment me again. Not tonight."

Cassandra's expression relaxed a little. She stepped forward, a little smile on her lips.

"I said, please..."

Her smile grew a bit wider as she reached the bed, her chest so full it might explode. She extended her fingertips, gently touching his hand. She saw him flinch, and he finally opened his eyes. That darkness made her shiver. He glanced at her and frowned a bit more.

"...You look different tonight," he whispered.

"...Do I?" She gently answered.

He frowned again and kept his eyes on her as she came closer. It was like he was observing some dangerous wild beast, almost... scared.

Cassandra made her fingertips slide up his arm, until she reached his biceps, and went to his exposed torso. His warm skin... She had missed it, and wanted to touch it more. She climbed on the bed, coming over him, and saw his confused expression. She could see it in his eyes. He was scrutinizing her, a little wrinkle between his eyebrows.

She couldn't even express how much she loved this man, how much she had missed him, how much she wanted him. As Kairen remained still with that confused expression, she slowly put her leg over, sitting on his waist, and put both her hands on his chest. She could tell he was afraid to believe that vision. His black eyes were fixated on her, looking at that young woman as if she was some illusion.

Cassandra gently leaned over to kiss him.

It was a very soft kiss on his lips, but it sent shivers down the depths of his being. He gasped and suddenly sat up, grabbing her face between his hands. His eyes were wide open, completely shocked, his breathing intense. It took a full minute for him to realize, to accept it. It really was her. For real, this time. None of all his nightmares and dreams had been able to replicate her face so perfectly, so beautifully, even down to its imperfections. The color of her green eyes, the curves of her lips, the delicacy of her nose.

Just then, she broke down a little, crying. Cassandra couldn't hold it anymore. She put her hands on his neck too, her tears rolling down her cheeks uncontrollably.

"I missed you..." She cried. "I really missed you...."

Before she could add another sentence, he suddenly kissed her, taking all of her lips. It was a desperate, savage kiss they both needed. She felt the warmth spread inside like a wildfire, driving her crazy. All of her being was invaded by this hurricane of desire. They had been apart for too long. If this was another treacherous dream, it was the most realistic one he'd had so far, and he was not ready to let it go.

He wanted her. Just to carve his being into her, to touch and taste her body. They kissed desperately, so eager their lips couldn't bear to part for a second. They just wanted each other, their other half. It was a reaction like nothing else could provoke but a wild, carnal desire. Something as old as the world, buried in their flesh.

His hands were going all over her, touching her and grabbing each inch of Cassandra's skin as if to keep her there, to make any second of this

real. Kairen couldn't understand, but he wanted this. He was like a mad man begging for a dream to last each second it could. He couldn't stop. Cassandra was just as eager as him. His warmth, that warmth that came from his core was driving her insane. She felt sensations she hadn't felt in a very, very long time rise in her. When he put his hands on her legs, under her skirt, she shivered with desire. Her hands were all over him, caressing his torso, his neck, his back, all of his hot skin. She wanted him.

They didn't have time for anything, their desire was burning like a hot flame and erasing all restraint. He took off his pants in a matter of seconds and ripped her piece of clothing that was separating them, and after some clumsy movements, their bodies reunited in one movement. Cassandra cried out under the brutal invasion. She felt him, filling her, completing her in a wave of pleasure. She bit her lower lip, but it only made him want to kiss that lip some more. They exchanged a long, gentle kiss. Kairen wanted to lose himself on the taste of her lips, eat her all up. It was gentle, yet a bit savage. They just couldn't express their love and desire enough. He started moving, making her breathe louder. They had their eyes locked in each other's, completely lost in that moment, as if they were alone in the world. His movements made her moan and cry for more. The sensations waking up in her were stronger than she had imagined, and he wasn't slowing down to let her catch up. The War God just couldn't have enough of her. He kept pouncing, not stopping, not slowing down; He just wanted her whole. He had craved that skin, that gentle taste. The sound of her voice in his ear, echoing in the room. He needed to make sure she was real, that she was really there with him. He had his arms wrapped around her, hugging her close, grabbing every inch of her skin he could, feeling her, confirming this. Kairen was so desperate, he kept moving inside her, out of it, almost crying how good it was. Cassandra kissed his eyes, his tears, repeatedly caressing his hair. Their bodies bouncing in each other were burning up, fast and hard. They just needed this, this beastly instinct between them.

They couldn't hold it in anymore. After just a few minutes, he rammed in with some wild movements, making her jump and cry on him. Cassandra couldn't retain her voice, the pleasure was breaking walls and making her lose control. All her extremities were burning, sweating with pleasure. She cried out in pleasure when he finished, exhausted, inside her.

They were both left panting, in the same position they had started. It had probably been their wildest and shortest love-making ever. She chuckled, still trembling a bit from the relish of that pleasure, and came to kiss him gently. He was willing to respond to anything her lips desired, caressing her skin relentlessly. The previously cold room had turned very hot in a short time, their heat melting together.

As he kept caressing her skin, he finally found what had been bothering him from earlier. Cassandra's skin was perfectly white and smooth, without an ounce of imperfection. Without any scar. He frowned, confused by this new miracle, and raised his eyes towards her once again.

"...How?" He whispered, caressing her hair without stopping.

Cassandra smiled gently.

"... The Water God," she simply said. "I guess he wanted to save his last daughters... before he passed."

Kairen let out a long sigh, and buried his face into her neck, closing his eyes and breathing deep. Whoever he had to thank for this miracle, he was grateful to no end. He didn't care to know how or why. He could imagine why the Creature had decided to take Cassandra away from him, from their world, but eventually, he had sent her back again... That was all he needed.

Cassandra felt a bit sad. She still didn't know why the Water God had decided to trade his life for hers... No one could tell what such a magnificent Creature was thinking at times like these. She took a deep breath and kissed her man again. She changed positions to get off him and lie against him. Kairen was unwilling to let go and wrapped her in his arms tight. She liked being trapped in his embrace.

"...It's good to be alive," she whispered. "I'm glad Kassian is fine... Did

you decide to raise him alone here?”

He nodded. Cassandra smiled. She would have all the time in the world to catch up with what she had missed... With her sister, too. She hoped Missandra was happy. Lady Kareen and Shareen, too, she wondered what they were up to now. Who had taken the gold throne? Opheus, or Anour? Kairen had obviously no intention to seat there... For now, she was just happy to be away from all those questions. It was like they were hiding in a little corner of eternity. She chuckled.

“What is it?”

“I think... I get to live my dream after all.”

The memory of a conversation they had, months and months ago, slowly came back to him. He nodded.

“We’ll do it all. Everything you wanted... To change it all.”

“What about you?” She asked gently. “You never told me what dream you had in mind.”

The War God smiled.

“It’s fine. Mine has already come true anyway...”

Cassandra was about to ask what it was, but then, she decided it didn’t really matter. This happiness was enough. She was just in a good place right now, a place where she was happy... Where she could be free.

In an Onyx Castle lost in the forgotten lands, the two of them fell asleep side by side.

The silent War God, and the slave girl who had changed his world.

He was born to kill. She was destined to die.

As two worlds collided, destiny had changed.