

Chapter 10

Krai must have easily been able to sense where its Master was because the dragon flew right back to the Palace without any instruction from Cassandra. She was still a bit afraid of flying, but she was also realizing how nice it was. One thing she'd never get tired of was the view of the Capital from above. She still hoped they'd go back to the north soon, though. She missed the quiet Onyx Castle and her friends. The Capital was too hot and humid.

The dragon landed with a loud growl in one of the big courts of the Palace, a square-shaped area made completely of stone. Kairen was waiting there, his eyes set on the young concubine as they arrived. He held out his arms, and Cassandra slid easily along the dragon's scales until he grabbed her. She smiled and kissed him softly.

Kairen took a step back, still holding her, to pull her off his dragon. He seemed a bit concerned.

"Did you find anything?" he asked.

"A bit, yes, but we still haven't found her," Cassandra sighed.

"You look tired."

She chuckled, putting her arms around his neck.

"My Lord, you keep saying that these days."

"You really do look tired."

"Fine...I'm hungry, actually. We didn't even eat."

Kairen stayed quiet for a little while, with his eyes so intently on her, he had Cassandra a bit confused. What was her Prince thinking about now? After a minute though, he seemed to decide on something and nodded.

"I have something for you. A present."

"A present?" she repeated, intrigued.

Kairen had already gifted her lots of dresses and jewelry. Well, more like his father or mother had, but still. What else could she be getting now? Something for their baby, perhaps? But Cassandra wasn't planning on raising the child here.

He turned around and carried her through the Palace. Even if she had no idea where they were going, Cassandra was patient enough not to ask. She enjoyed the little ride, caressing her Prince's hairline and telling him about everything she and Shareen had learned. He didn't react or say much, even to the part where they had encountered his half-sister, but Cassandra didn't expect him to anyway.

After a bit more walking, he finally let her down in front of a large door she had never seen before, but by the looks of it, it was a brand new one. The redwood stood out from the stone walls, and there weren't many windows nearby. However, they were definitely near Kairen's apartments, making her think it was within his private area of the Palace.

"This is yours from now on," he said.

He was handing her a key, with a complex shape and a unique redwood handle. Cassandra took it with a shy smile, even more intrigued now. She then turned to slowly open the door, her heart rate accelerating.

She didn't expect what was behind the door and was rendered speechless in the doorway.

Green, green everywhere. Green leaves, herbs, and plants as far as her eyes could see. Cassandra took a few steps in, unable to close her mouth. There were four long tables with hundreds of different herbs on them in different colored pots. Under her feet was fresh grass. There were several patches of herbs and flowers growing here and there, in delimited areas. For a second, she had thought it was a greenhouse, but it didn't exactly have a roof. Instead, above her head was a large pergola with ivy and other climbing, trailing plants covering most of the framework. The sun could still pass through, but the whole place was more fresh than what Cassandra usually experienced in the palace. The main reasons were the little fountains and rivers artificially planted that ran from one side to the other, refreshing the whole area. Actually, those fountains even had some flowers in them.

"Waterlilies," she whispered with a smile.

"Do you like it?"

She turned to her Prince, baffled.

“You’re giving me a garden?”

Kairen nodded.

“Since you don’t care for gold, dresses, or jewelry.”

So, he had thought about something that would make her happy and gifted her a whole herbal garden? Cassandra was amazed. She had never thought that Kairen would be able to put up such a thing! And in such a short amount of time! She became teary just thinking about it.

She turned around and walked back to him, throwing herself into his arms.

“I love it...I love you. Thank you!”

Kairen hugged her back and kissed her cheek. He felt like it had been a long time since he had openly displayed a genuine smile like this. Cassandra chuckled and turned her head in search of his lips to kiss him; a long, sweet and grateful kiss. He was relieved to see her happier, after her sour day and how she had been sick earlier.

Cassandra kept her lips going, enjoying the proximity between them, but Kairen pulled away with an annoyed groan.

“What is it?” she asked, a bit surprised.

He sighed.

“If we keep going, I’ll want to have sex with you. Here and now.”

Cassandra blushed, the red spreading to her ears, so she looked down. Oh, indeed...it was better if they stopped now. She might have been teasing him a bit too much without knowing. She laughed at the Prince’s hungry expression and stepped back innocently, turning around to explore her new herbal garden.

She truly loved this place. It was green and cold enough to have her forget the Palace’s climate that she couldn’t seem to get accustomed to. Everywhere she looked she found new and familiar herbs, dozens of them. Almost every medicinal herb or plant known in this Empire was gathered here for her to play with. She hadn’t noticed it right away, but at the very end of that garden was actually a wide desk with parchments about medicine, ink and blank paper for her personal use. Whoever had prepared it had also put dozens of pots, pitchers, mortars, pestles, scales and weights, jars, and show globes. Cassandra could spend hours studying everything here!

While she was still observing everything in awe, Kairen came up from behind, gently hugging her with his hands on her tummy, and kissed her temple.

“So you like it,” he simply said.

“I love it, really. Were you trying to cheer me up?”

She hadn't been happy since they came to the Palace, and they both knew that. For the usually aloof man to actually go out of his way and prepare all this for her, it melted her heart.

Cassandra smiled and grabbed his face to kiss him more passionately, making him groan.

“Cassandra, if you keep going...”

“How far are we from your bedroom?”

His brain snapped at her words.

Everything that happened next was too fast for her to focus. She was brought back to his bedroom not even a minute later and laid gently on the bed, her dress quickly lifted above her waist, making her breathe loudly in response.

The Prince didn't lose any time. Cassandra cried out when he slid in, biting her lips and shivering. A hot chill spread through her skin, as he began thrusting, fast and hard. She didn't want to hold back and moaned as loudly as she needed, her heart thumping. Holding on to him, she let him set the pace. Cassandra held on to his neck and closed her eyes, focusing on the sensations. His movements were so wild, he only focused on kissing her skin when it came close to his lips and kept moving, restlessly. The young concubine was running out of breath, crying out louder, struggling to keep up with him.

Kairen couldn't hold back for long however, his rut reaching its edge after a few more minutes, releasing himself, moaning. Cassandra curved her body into him, releasing a long sigh of pleasure.

The young concubine was exhausted after that very short but intense lovemaking session. She kept her eyes shut for a bit longer, as her breathing and heartbeat slowly calmed down. Kairen tenderly sprinkled light kisses all over her smooth skin, allowing her time to recover. They were still embracing one another, and Cassandra didn't want to let go of him, not yet.

“Rest here for a bit.”

“I don’t want to...it’s still early,” she protested.

“You’re tired.”

“I’m fine.”

He was about to say something, but all of a sudden, he froze. His reaction had Cassandra on alert too. She sat up, now completely awake, looking for what had caught his attention. She heard it a few seconds later; someone’s screams were coming from outside.

Kairen got on his feet and put his pants back on before leaving the room in a hurry. Cassandra followed right after him as soon as she could, worried.

To their surprise, at one end of the corridor Shareen was dragging one of the men from earlier. While she looked fine, her clothes were sullied by a terrifying amount of blood. The man she was dragging was bloodied and soiled as well.

“Ah, there you are!” She exclaimed. “Look, I kept one for you. Ask him.”

Cassandra didn’t approach, as the smell would definitely make her sick. She stayed a couple of steps behind Kairen.

“Who is that?” Kairen questioned.

“One of the men who tried to attack us earlier,” said Shareen. “They mistook your woman for her sister. Apparently, she owes them money.”

“You were attacked?” he growled, glaring at the man and taking out his sword.

His sister rolled her eyes.

“I said they tried, brother. Krai took her away and I played a bit, but they weren’t much fun. They all died a painful death, except this one. I kept the chief alive for Cassie to interrogate.”

Saying she kept him alive was an odd way of putting it. It would have been more believable if the man didn’t have a scary trail of blood behind him, an eye missing and several of his fingers cut off. Even for Cassandra who was used to injuries, he was a horrible sight to see. She was getting a bit annoyed at Shareen and her “games”.

Cassandra put her irritation aside.

“What do you know about my younger sister, Mie?” she asked.

“That bitch took my money! She...Gaaaah!”

Unfortunately, Cassandra didn't look away fast enough. A couple of fingers flew off, and the man screamed in pain while Shareen clicked her tongue.

“What did I tell you? Watch your language, asshole. Next time I hear you use that word to disrespect any woman, I'm cutting off your eleventh finger, if you know what I mean.”

It took a few seconds for the man to calm down and for Cassandra to recompose herself. She knew Shareen was not patient or forgiving, but still.

“My sister,” she repeated.

“She...that wo...woman stole our money. We gambled and she cheated us! She took thousands from us! We tried to have her pay it back, but...but she was gone. We only heard about her being in the main street three months ago, but we couldn't find her. So we were looking in the Red District...in case she came back.”

Cassandra sighed. At least she knew Mie was still around within the last three months. If she hadn't left before then, she probably had found a way to stay without them finding her. How did she do it, though? The Capital was so vast, if she moved to another part of the city, it would be hard to find her. Did she find a new place with the money she had gotten? If it was Cassandra, she would have hidden from those thugs by relocating to one of the upper areas, where the nobles and rich lived.

“What does she look like?” Inquired Cassandra.

“That woman Mie is... a lot like you...but...prettier and more curvy.”

Cassandra couldn't help but roll her eyes. The man's choice of words were really crude.

“Did she ever mention anything? My sister?”

“I don't know! She...she was good with herbs, she always bought a lot. She made potions for the who...the prostitutes. Her...her husband sold a lot too.”

Cassandra stilled suddenly.

“What? Her husband?”

“Yeah. She got married last year to a rich merchant’s son. He’s dead, though.”

It didn’t make any sense. If Missandra was still working in the Red District then, how did she get married? Cassandra was beyond confused.

“What was his name?”

“I don’t know! She said he died of an illness or whatever months ago!”

Cassandra sighed. She wouldn’t learn any more from this man. She even doubted if half of what he said was even true. She shook her head when Kairen sent her a questioning gaze, meaning she was done with him.

“Scram,” said Shareen.

“W...what?”

“I said beat it before I put my sword up your ass! You’re lucky we have a pregnant woman here!”

The man spat blood in Cassandra’s way.

“Your wretched sister better pay me back my money, or I’ll find her and...”

His head rolled before he finished his sentence. Cassandra turned away, disgusted. Even Shareen sighed.

“Really, brother? I have to pick up the trash after you now. You couldn’t have waited for him to go and die outside...Seriously?!”

Cassandra took deep breaths, closing her eyes and focusing on the soothing smell around her. Dahlia gently rubbed her back and helped her relax a bit.

“Does this make you feel better?” asked Kairen, standing off to the side.

She nodded.

With Dahlia’s help, Cassandra had concocted a solution of lemon and verbena, and was now inhaling it from a little basin. The vapors were helping to greatly reduce her nausea. She had vomited again after the beheading, it was too much for her eyes and

stomach to handle. A group of servants were cleaning the area, while Cassandra had been accompanied back to her herbal garden, where she could bask in some fresh air.

“Damn, I really don’t ever want to have children,” sighed Shareen, who was watching reluctantly next to her brother. “Shall I call Mother?”

“I’m fine,” said Cassandra. “I already feel a lot better.”

She may have to keep more of that solution close by from now on. She didn’t imagine it would be so effective.

“I will go and buy more lemons later,” said Dahlia.

Cassandra nodded, grateful. She could always grow more verbena here, even a whole lemon tree.

“Let’s skip the banquet,” said Kairen.

“Again? Brother, Father will really throw a fit. And it’s the last evening before the New Year Celebrations.”

“I don’t care.”

Shareen didn’t add anything as her brother already had his usual glare on. Cassandra also wished the Celebrations were over already, so they could finally leave the Palace. However, she still hadn’t forgotten the matter of the snake. She glanced at her fingers, which were mostly clear of any blue tint now.

“No, we should go,” she said with determination. “I want to find out who was behind that snake.”

“You think you’ll know tonight already?” Asked Shareen, interested.

Cassandra nodded and stood up, walking back to Kairen.

“Can we take a bath before we go?”

Of course he quickly agreed, and Shareen decided she would need one too, in her own apartments of course. Dahlia, who had naturally taken the lead of the servants preparing the bath, also made sure to include verbena and a bit of lemon for the water, which helped Cassandra relax even more efficiently. For once, Kairen let her bathe alone, staying by her side once he had dismissed everyone with an efficient glare.

“Those make you feel better?” he asked, looking at the plant of verbena Cassandra had brought from the garden.

She nodded.

“I’ve always liked this scent. They grew in the south too, but it was probably a different species. The ones I remember were blue and purple, not white like those...I think the smell was stronger, too.”

“We can get more if you need them.”

Cassandra chuckled. She knew her Prince would gather all the verbena in the country for her if she asked him to. It would be a bit extreme though. She shook her head, getting out of the bath with his help.

“No need,” she said while giving him a peck on the lips.

The demonstrations of affection between them were now so natural and regular, Cassandra barely blushed anymore. Kairen always watched her every move, his presence had become something she was used to and she craved it when he wasn’t near.

Once again she repeated the usual process of picking out a dress and some jewelry. She even put some flowers in her hair, as she couldn’t stand the perfumes brought by the servants. She had never liked those overbearing, heavy scents from the Empire’s beauty products to begin with, but now with her pregnancy, her sense of smell was even more hypersensitive. It didn’t lessen her beauty at all, though. The white flowers she had picked from her garden suited her adorably, giving her an even purer appearance than usual.

Cassandra got a few whispers when she entered the Imperial Hall from giggling concubines who made fun of her hair decorations, whispering about how her Prince must be unwilling to spoil her. But Cassandra didn’t really mind. She probably would stop hearing such things once the news about her herbal garden spread.

Kairen was glaring around, making sure any concubine or Princess that dared to make eye contact would instantly be silenced. Compared to his gentle and innocent concubine, the War God was still as scary and impressive as ever for anyone else. They took their seats, once again, Cassandra on Kairen’s lap. No one seemed to react to that anymore, though some concubines were red-faced and green with envy. Shareen sat next to them, sinking comfortably back into her chair.

“So? How do you intend to find her?” she asked.

Cassandra smiled, taking a look around. After carefully observing the various concubines, she only had one suspect.

“The woman in red, the second one from the left, at the Second Prince’s feet.”

Shareen looked over, lost in thought, trying to remember.

“That’s...Vrehan’s newest concubine. She’s a soldier’s daughter, I think. I can’t remember her name... Why do you think it’s her? Are you sure?”

Cassandra slowly nodded, but remained silent because of the Emperor’s entrance. He took his place on the golden throne, looking a bit unhappy. Cassandra wondered if something had happened, but the Emperor simply sat and ordered for the usual festivities to begin. As she was quite hungry, Cassandra began eating while watching the dancers’ performance. She wasn’t paying attention to them, though. Truth was, her main focus was on the Second Prince’s Concubine. After a while, Shareen leaned closer to her.

“Cassie, spill it! How are you so sure?”

“Look at the dark circles under her eyes,” whispered Cassandra. “She hasn’t been sleeping well, or perhaps, not at all. After hearing what I said that day, anyone who had been in contact with the snake would have been too worried to sleep.”

“Because they would believe you?” Shareen questioned doubtfully.

“Even if they didn’t, all I needed was to plant a little seed of doubt. With my blue fingers, she probably couldn’t help but wonder endlessly if it was real or not; if she could actually die in her sleep. That seed of doubt would make it hard for her to sleep properly. Unable to rest properly, she would feel more and more tired. And in turn, make her wonder even more if the symptoms were all tied together.”

Shareen remained speechless. Cassandra’s plan was to have the culprit tire herself out and show signs of fatigue? The Princess couldn’t help but be a bit sceptical.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit light?”

“Look at her hands,” whispered Cassandra.

Indeed, something looked wrong with the young concubine's hands. They couldn't possibly have turned blue, that was obviously something Cassandra had made up. Actually...they looked red and dry.

“What did that little...”

“She's washed them too much,” explained Cassandra. “She saw my blue-tinted hands and her natural reaction was to try and wash off as much as she could, thinking scrubbing would make whatever she had got on them disappear without the need for an antidote.”

Shareen was impressed. Just a few words from Cassandra had made such a mess in that woman's mind. Not that their Second Brother's Concubines were considered smart at all, but still.

“You had predicted all that?”

“I didn't think she would ruin the skin on her hands, but I was hoping to see the lack of sleep after a couple of days.”

Nevertheless, it was impressive. Cassandra's days of treating patients, and dealing with dumb and entitled concubines had left her with some unexpected skills.

A large part of it was due to the lack of acceptable education available to the people, particularly anything in terms of studying medicine. A strong and educated woman like Kareen was a rarity inside the Palace. The majority of concubines were chosen based on looks, and were not particularly smart to begin with. Cassandra had hoped it would also be the case of the culprit, who had obviously sent the snake in without really thinking of the consequences.

“One of Vrehan's concubines, of course,” whispered Shareen.

She was glaring towards the Second Brother, but he didn't even notice. He was completely absorbed in a heated discussion with his sister, Phetra. Cassandra wondered if he was behind this. The feud between those siblings and Kairen wasn't to be taken lightly, not if she wanted to survive.

Her Prince too, had his dark eyes sending daggers their way, all the while holding tightly to Cassandra.

“How are you going to deal with her now?” questioned Shareen with a smirk.

Cassandra had no idea. She would have let her Prince deal with it, but if that woman was only a pawn, she didn't really deserve death.

"I heard Sister Shareen had an interesting outing with Brother Kairen's Concubine today," gossiped Phetra from across the hall.

Immediately, everyone else stopped talking. That woman's voice alone was enough to make Cassandra's skin crawl. What was she up to now? Her eyes were glancing innocently at Shareen. However, the Princess had an amused smirk, like a cat prepared to play with her prey.

"You should watch your concubine more carefully Brother, she seems to carelessly wander outside the Palace."

"What are you talking about, Princess Phetra?" asked one of the concubines.

That woman was a poor actress. She had an obvious smile, and Cassandra could tell she was only too happy to play in Phetra's little games. Cassandra stayed expressionless, but she could feel Kairen's fingers were restless along her back. Despite his solemn expression, she could tell her Prince was annoyed, too.

"You are well informed, Princess Phetra," replied Cassandra. "I wonder why my outings with Princess Shareen are of any importance to you?"

Phetra's face turned sour. One could tell she didn't expect Cassandra to reply back to her, and was pissed about that. Her expression was torn between anger and disgust.

"I suppose you're right, it shouldn't be too surprising to see you two hanging around the whore houses."

The insult was so clear, even the Emperor slammed his hand on his throne.

"Phetra! Watch your words, Daughter! Or else you will really anger me!"

"There is nothing upsetting about this, Dear Father," dismissed Shareen turning to her sister. "After all, you knew that place long before we did...didn't you Phetra? I bet it reminds you of your dear mother."

Cassandra didn't expect this. Their mother was a prostitute? Phetra turned red in anger, standing up suddenly. Next to her, the Second Prince, Vrehan narrowed his eyes on her.

"Phetra, sit."

“What is the meaning of this!” The Emperor roared, clearly pissed. “If you have things to say, Phetra, speak now or shut up!”

“My apologies, Father. But I was upset because of Shareen’s misconduct today. Were you aware she abused our younger sister?”

For a few seconds, the Emperor seemed confused.

“Your younger sister?” he repeated.

“Valeria, Father! She mistreated Valeria!”

Shareen laughed loudly, and even Cassandra felt their situation pitiful. The Emperor had so many daughters, he couldn’t even grasp who Phetra was talking about right away, even after her name was given. He probably didn’t care much for the younger Princesses.

“Oh right, Valeria. What about her?”

Phetra was obviously annoyed that their father didn’t care much about the situation. She clicked her tongue, irritated. As if she had been called, Valeria emerged from the shadows behind Phetra. The young Princess was clearly uncomfortable being there, appearing in front of them on the verge of tears. But Phetra pushed her forward anyway without a care.

“See! Shareen grabbed her arm so violently! Is it fine for her to abuse her younger sisters? Don’t you hate us fighting, Father?”

Cassandra noticed the bandage on Valeria’s arm and shook her head. This was clearly too much of an exaggeration. She had been there, she knew that despite Shareen’s tight grip on her sisters’ arm, she certainly didn’t use enough force to require those ridiculous bandages or even any medicine. Did Phetra have her put it on just for show? This was absurd!

“Aren’t you going to say anything in her defense, Father?” insisted Phetra.

“Well...” sighed the Emperor.

“Are you done, Phetra?” growled Shareen, annoyed. “That child isn’t even injured!”

“Look at this! Does she seem fine to you?”

Cassandra stood up unexpectedly, all eyes on her. She had enough of Phetra's petty game, trying to make such a performance, even using her younger sister like this.

"Take off her bandage, then."

"Excuse me?"

"Take off her bandage. I am the Imperial Physician, I will be able to tell if she is injured or not."

Phetra was about to protest, but a glare from the Emperor kept her quiet. Cassandra was appointed Imperial Physician by the Emperor himself, she had every right to make use of that title. After a few seconds of hesitation, Phetra put on a smirk.

"I'm sorry, unfortunately she cannot. The Imperial Doctor who already saw her warned that the bandages cannot be removed for two weeks, or else she will scar."

Cassandra sighed. This woman was so stubborn.

One could tell everyone in the Great Hall was waiting to see who would have the last word between the War God's Favorite and an Imperial Princess. The tension was palpable; some of the women were excited to see how this would turn out. Princess Phetra had a triumphant smile on already. Whereas Cassandra, no matter how favored by the Prince or Emperor she was, couldn't disobey her.

"Is that so?"

Those three simple words from Cassandra took everyone by surprise. Her voice was too calm. While Phetra was still dumbfounded, the young concubine stepped away from her Prince's knee and walked down their way, seemingly unafraid. Everyone watched her cross the Hall without saying a word. Had that woman gone crazy?

However, Cassandra was walking very calmly and without an ounce of fear in her eyes. Maybe her baby was giving her some unexpected strength, but she couldn't stand being afraid of those people anymore. The fire of a dragon was glowing in her eyes.

She arrived in front of Phetra and her younger sister Valeria. While not giving one look at the first, she seemingly bowed to the other. After a few seconds of that strange posture, she got back up, turning to Phetra.

The Princess didn't even bother to hide her annoyance.

“What are you doing! I forbid you from touching her!”

“I do not need to touch her,” Cassandra retorted. “This bandage doesn’t even smell like medicine. It doesn’t smell like anything.”

A silence followed her words, and Phetra went paler and paler as everyone present slowly understood.

Medicine in the Dragon Empire always smelled strong, and most of the time, horribly so. It was usually made of greasy and thick balms that would smell even worse, had they been kept under bandages like the one on Valeria’s arm. However, from what the young concubine had said, it was obvious. While faking Valeria’s injury under such bandages, they hadn’t even bothered to apply any kind of balm underneath, and anyone could tell with a sniff. Even the second Prince’s dragon behind them, that was usually so moody for nothing, was resting in its cage, unbothered. The creature certainly wouldn’t have stayed put with the smell of the medicine so close.

Cassandra stared right into Phetra’s dark eyes for a few seconds, not showing an ounce of fear, and turned back before her enemy could even reply.

“You...You...!”

But nothing came out of the Princess’ lips, and Cassandra calmly walked back to her Prince. Kairen had a terrifying smirk, much like Shareen’s. As his concubine joined him and sat on his lap again, his eyes didn’t leave Phetra for one second.

Meanwhile, the Emperor slammed the Golden Throne again, and this time, his Golden Dragon behind him growled loudly, as if to show his Master’s anger.

“Phetra, what is this? Valeria, take off that bandage! Right now!”

The Princess was completely white, as was her younger sister. Slowly, trembling hands took off the bandage, revealing a perfectly fine arm. Kairen slowly kissed Cassandra’s shoulder, proud of his young concubine. His sister, too, was exulting.

“Look at this, Father. My sisters work so hard at insulting and framing me, don’t they?”

“Father, I...I can explain. She...Valeria came to me crying! I only wanted to get justice for...”

Phetra kept trying to justify her lie, miserably. Cassandra frowned. That woman was really too disgusting. She was in such a hurry to throw her younger sister in the death pit when she was obviously the one behind all this. Even worse, the Second Prince completely ignored them, as if this whole situation wasn't his concern. He wasn't any better than Phetra. Cassandra exchanged a look with her Prince, but Kairen remained silent, continuously caressing her back and hair, his dark eyes still fixated on Phetra with a murderous glare.

“Silence!” yelled the Emperor, followed by his dragon's furious growl. “I shall not hear any more! Valeria, you'll be punished by Shareen for framing her and lying. I don't care what it is! And you, Phetra, I will personally deal with you later. Now you better sit down and shut up until this banquet is over! I don't want to see either of you at the New Year's celebrations, either!”

Despite everything said, Cassandra felt unsatisfied. Phetra was obviously devastated, but Cassandra found that the punishment was way too light for her. Seeing her clenched fists, Shareen gestured for her to ignore it.

“She is our Second Brother's favorite sister,” she whispered. “Father will never punish her too harshly, unless she really pushes it.”

Once again, the importance of the siblings' bonds was showing. Even if he remained silent all along, Phetra's status was protected by her closeness to her brother, the Second Prince Vrehan. Cassandra felt it was very unfair for the poor Valeria.

“At least,” said Shareen, “now I will be able to interrogate that little swine.”

She had her feline eyes set on Valeria. Cassandra suddenly remembered the issue of the abortion potion was left hanging, too. Was Phetra really behind this? And more importantly, who was pregnant?

“Wouldn't the Emperor know if one of them were pregnant?”

“The Princesses don't have dragon children, only the Princes can transmit the dragon's blood to their children.”

“Does the Emperor make it public if an egg appears?”

“Generally, no. Father doesn't check the vault every day. Glahad sometimes guards it, but if another dragon goes in and comes out with an egg, we know something is up. However, not all eggs are taken out.”

“Why?”

Shareen sneered.

“Shouldn’t you know best? Remember how the dragons know their master’s feelings before they even realize them?”

Cassandra took a few minutes to think about that. If what Shareen said was right, then dragons didn’t systematically claim their offspring unless they...wanted them. She looked around at all the princes and concubines. Some of the princes probably didn’t care much once they had enough concubines and a few sons.

“Which of your brothers have children?” she whispered.

“Sephir, Vrehan, and Lephys,” said Kairen.

“Sephir has one son and two daughters,” added Shareen. “Vrehan has two sons and six daughters, another on the way. And Lephys...Lephys has four sons and eight or nine daughters. But three of his women are pregnant.”

Cassandra sighed. She had forgotten the Fifth Prince was notorious for his many, many concubines. Indeed, he was always surrounded by young and beautiful concubines to fool around with. If the rumor about him having over two hundred concubines was true, it was surprising that he hadn’t fathered more children. Despite his many heirs, he didn’t seem to have much interest in the golden throne, though.

“What of the Fourth and Sixth Prince?” Cassandra asked.

“Anour is too young; he only has one concubine for now. And Opheus...he has a wife, but she hasn’t given him a child yet. I don’t think he’s very interested, either. His mother is the one pressuring him.”

It seemed to be true. The Fifth Prince was happily chatting with one of his women, but the others looked bored and unwilling to be here. In comparison, Vrehan’s women seemed desperate for their Prince’s attention.

Cassandra felt grateful she wasn’t like those women. Kairen only had eyes for her, and Krai had cared for their egg as soon as it appeared, although he had let Kareen take it. She turned to her Prince, lovingly kissing him, and for once, surprising Kairen by doing so. Her boldness in front of so many people was unusual. Many eyes saw the scene, and some concubines were dying of jealousy. There were a few too many glares. Kairen glared right back at them and, as if responding to his master, Krai

suddenly appeared a few seconds later, flying down from the open roof with a warning growl. The dragon was at least as persuasive as its master, and soon no one dared to look their way.

The only person to be overjoyed with the dragon's presence was the Emperor, as if there weren't already two of his other sons' dragons there, resting in their cages behind their owners.

"Look at him! This beautiful beast!"

Krai didn't seem to care much for flattery, and as usual, crouched down next to Cassandra, head next to Kairen's knee, making sure to be where the young concubine's fingers could find it.

Once again, they attracted much attention. Some women were sweating to see how many fingers she was going to lose, while the others were even more jealous of her confidence, glaring at the other dragons as if they were untamed wild beasts.

"Pretty White Lily, tell me, did you enjoy your present?" suddenly asked the Emperor.

"Your Highness, you know about it?"

"Of course I know! My son steals one of the Palace's wings and destroys it to have a herbal garden made for his concubine, and I shouldn't know about it?"

Cassandra was speechless. Kairen actually had that garden made from another room, after destroying it, too? In a few days? How did he even manage to have it done in such a short time?

"Anyway, just enjoy it, child! I'll have more herbs or plants and what-not brought for you to play with. So stay a bit longer, hm?"

So that was the Emperor's aim? To have Kairen and her stay longer after the festivities? As she didn't want to refuse him, Cassandra only bowed slightly. After that, the Emperor went on to try and convince Kairen and Shareen to have their mother attend the festivities, but both pretty much ignored his plea, leaving their father to deal with his stubborn concubine.

As it appeared, Kareen was still sulking over him keeping Kairen, and wouldn't even come over, making the Emperor actually visit her instead! Cassandra couldn't help but admire that woman a bit more every day. Meanwhile, her gaze went back to Phetra. The Princess was leaning over to chat with the Fifth Prince, whispering

something to him with a forced smile. Cassandra was surprised by the closeness between them, and more worryingly, the couple of glances she had sent her way. What was that snake preparing this time?

Cassandra was waiting for the banquet to come to an end, caressing Krai's head. The dragon had decided to take a nap while curled around Kairen's throne, its hot breath warming up Cassandra's legs.

The Emperor was still discussing the New Year's celebrations, but Cassandra didn't listen to him much. Instead, her eyes were staring right at the woman who had put a snake in her bedroom. She had noticed how that concubine was avoiding looking their way. Actually, that woman's eyes only went from her Prince Vrehan, to the floor, or her fidgety hands. She knew.

The more she thought about it, the more disgusted Cassandra was. That woman had put a snake in her bedroom, and hadn't cared what would happen from that. She obviously didn't know much about the snake's species or its venom, yet she had put Cassandra and her child at risk.

Kairen too was glaring at that woman, making her absolutely terrified. Cassandra could see her lips trembling and her eyes on the verge of tears from where she sat. It became worse when Krai started growling too. Despite its resting posture and Cassandra's caresses, the Black Dragon didn't look calm at all, its ruby eyes were glowing.

It had started slowly, but as the glares at the concubine grew longer and longer, the dragon's growl increased along, to the point where no one could pretend to ignore it anymore.

"Son, what is wrong with you today?" frowned the Emperor. "Your dragon is deafening us!"

"Maybe he is unhappy with snakes attempting to hurt his progeny," coldly replied Kairen.

"His..."

A cold silence spread in the room, as most people paled. The Emperor stood up and threw his cup on the floor.

"Who dares! Who dares to meddle with the Imperial Children! In my Palace!"

The young concubine was still looking down, on the verge of tears, shivering like crazy. Even her Prince didn't spare her a glance, looking completely unaffected. Either he didn't know or was really good at acting ignorant, Cassandra couldn't say.

As absolutely everyone in the Hall remained silent despite the Emperor's anger, Shareen smirked.

"Leave it be, Father. Or do you think my brother won't punish those people accordingly? Who would make an attempt on the War God's child's life and make it out alive?"

"Kairen!" yelled the Emperor. "If you want to settle this alone, make it quick! I won't allow those snakes in the Imperial Palace!"

"Don't worry, Father," hissed Kairen. "I'll take care of the vermin as quickly and painfully as I can."

The concubine was crying silently, her eyes desperately stuck on the ground, but no one around her spared her a glance. She kept trying to get Vrehan's attention, but the Prince resolutely ignored her.

As it seemed she couldn't stand it anymore, she suddenly stood up, trying to leave. Despite her attempt at slipping out discreetly, it was impossible not to notice someone leaving the room when no one else but the performers were moving.

Shareen reacted first, her whip lashing the air and the floor in acute sounds. It made everyone stop moving, and the concubine freeze. Everyone turned their eyes toward her, as she seemed unsure what to do, standing there with shaking limbs.

Gently, Cassandra felt Kairen switch positions with her. She was now sitting by herself on his throne, while the War God stood up, and went down the stairs, walking to the woman. Everyone around held their breath. Despite the four dragons present, the most terrifying being in the room was human, and walked as silently, and as inevitably as death, towards that woman. She gasped, taking one step back, her eyes expressing pure terror.

"I...I didn't...I just... The snake... was... not..."

She couldn't even breathe enough to talk. Even Cassandra's heartbeat was going crazy just from watching the scene, her hands on the throne's arms. In front of her, Krai was growling even more fiercely, arching its back and showing off its fangs, the

black tail violently swinging in the air. The dragon wasn't moving away from her, however, as if there was some invisible leash between it and the throne or Cassandra.

The Third Prince, however, was walking to the woman at a stable, scary pace. The woman was the very face of terror itself. She couldn't even cry or beg properly, yet, when he suddenly arrived a couple of steps from her, she gasped again, ugly crying.

“Was it you?”

His question was only three words, but it felt like a death sentence. The entire audience thought the woman would lie. She could deny it, pretend she had nothing to do with it. But with her trembling lips, she only glanced once in Vrehan's direction. He wasn't even looking at her. The utter pain that appeared on her face was heart-wrenching.

After a long, painful silence, she slowly nodded.

“I...”

Whatever she was about to say, the Prince wouldn't hear it. He grabbed her and, without an ounce of compassion, dragged her across the hall. The woman's cries and pleas were unbearable.

“Please! Please! No! I didn't mean to kill her! I didn't! I was just...! Don't kill me, please! Please! I beg you! Your Highness! Save me! Please! I didn't know! I was just jealous! Please! Help me!”

Cassandra did her best not to react, but it was hard. The woman was begging both Kairen and Vrehan to spare her, but neither listened. No matter how much she screamed, no one intervened as she was dragged to the Black Dragon, who was waiting for its prey with a terrible growl. As soon as she was within reach, and without an order from The War God, Krai jumped on the woman, killing her in a matter of seconds. The violent scene excited the other dragons, who all seemed to want to be part of it, growling and opening their maws.

As Kairen reunited with her, Cassandra tried to calm down. No matter how that woman had targeted her, she would never feel content over someone's death. Especially since it felt like that woman had been abandoned by all. The cold in her heart was warmed up as soon as Kairen pulled her in his arms, again.

“What a...” said the Emperor, astonished. “Vrehan! Won't you watch your women better!”

The Second Prince immediately looked irritated. Cassandra couldn't help but feel he deserved that much. How could he act like it was unrelated to him? He clicked his tongue.

"Maybe my brother should keep his woman better, as well, Father. If she stirs up jealousy around her..."

"Didn't you forbid killing during dinner, Father!" claimed Phetra right after him. "How is it fine to let a dragon kill someone now?"

The Emperor looked angry and was about to shout back, but Shareen was faster.

"Rejoice, Sister. Didn't you ask for a sacrifice a few days ago? Don't hesitate, if you or brother Vrehan have more candidates. My brother's dragon is always hungry for deceitful snakes."

Phetra looked as if Shareen's words had bitten her.

All four dragons were still growling, but the most furious ones were Krai and the Second Prince's red dragon, Vhan. They kept growling at each other as if they were about to fight, and their masters were glaring at one another the exact same way.

"Enough, all of you!" thundered the Emperor. "No more fighting and arguing and killing. I have had enough!"

Cassandra noted that despite his generalities, the Emperor's words were mostly said to Vrehan and his sister, and he barely looked Kairen's way. She turned to him, whispering.

"Why didn't you kill her yourself?" Cassandra asked.

"The smell of blood makes you sick," he simply replied.

Cassandra would have found it funny, in other circumstances. Krai eating a human being wasn't a much better sight. But indeed, it was a quick job. There wasn't any trace left of the poor woman.

After what had happened, everyone else was only hoping no one felt murderous anymore, and the conversations were changed to the upcoming celebrations. Neither Cassandra nor Kairen had much interest in those. Phetra and Vrehan remained silent throughout, too, though that didn't stop their murderous glares.

Cassandra ignored them, focusing on her dinner, and chatting with Shareen. Kairen, as usual, didn't talk much, but he was holding her by the waist all the time and caressing her skin, reminding her of his presence every second.

"Can you really make Valeria talk?" she whispered.

Shareen frowned, looking at her younger half-sister, hiding behind Phetra.

"I can. If Phetra lets her live until I get my hands on her, that is. I'll get her right after the banquet, she won't be able to leave. And she is already terrified after Brother's little show anyway. I'll just drag her to my apartments until the little swine speaks. On a side note, do you think you can learn more about the abortion potion?"

"I'll study it," said Cassandra. "The bottle and contents can give some information about whoever made it. But, that will give me another occasion to look for my sister."

"How so?"

"If it was me...If I had a hefty sum of money, my freedom and no more people to work for, I would have tried to set up a way to earn more money. Missandra probably opened some sort of business somewhere. If she did, it has to be with something she knew well, and the only thing I can think of is our knowledge in herbs and plants."

"She could have learned something else in the meantime," argued Shareen. "Or she could work for any shop."

Cassandra chuckled.

"Maybe, but I don't see my sister taking orders if she had a choice. You heard it too; she is as proud as ever. If she acquired as much as that bandit said, then I would bet she also saved some by herself. She would rather remain independent. I am not sure about the business, but medicine in the Dragon Empire is a lucrative business. With her knowledge, she could work it out."

"But you said she was only seven when she was sold."

Cassandra looked around, a bit worried about talking of her childhood in the presence of those people, but with the performers' music and chatter, no one could hear them whisper.

"The Rain Tribe children learn about plants and herbs before we even learn how to write. It is considered the most basic and necessary knowledge. Missandra and I used

to follow our mother everywhere, and she was the tribe's doctor. We were the most knowledgeable."

While she talked, both Shareen and Kairen had the same odd feeling. They often forgot that Cassandra had been born and raised in another country, another culture. Her white skin should have been a constant reminder, yet she acted so discreet and quiet most of the time, her past was rarely brought up.

"Fine," said Shareen. "I guess you'll have to look into the herbs businesses."

"You want to go out again?" asked the Prince, with an unhappy frown.

Cassandra smiled at him and gently kissed him.

"I'll be careful again, I promise. With Shareen and Krai, too."

The dragon immediately raised its head, putting its hot snout against Cassandra's thigh.

"I'm curious to meet that mischievous sister of yours," admitted Shareen. "I do have a thing for troublemakers.""