

Chapter 27

The Black Dragon and the other creature were surprised by the sudden collapse of part of the Arena, interrupting their fight. The rocks and stones continued to collapse for a long while as more and more of the structure was attracted to the destruction, falling like dominoes. Soon enough, an impressive portion of the Arena was in shambles, the bars of the cells down below now exposed to the sky. Both dragons stared at the massive mountain of rocks, blinking wildly from the dust that had been exhaled into the air. Once it had settled though, a long silence followed. For a while, nothing in the Arena moved.

Krai softly growled, as if calling for someone. Next to it, the creature retreated back, its sibling already lying dead in the dust a few steps away, and its rib cage exposed to the air. The fight had been horrible, the difference in strength was obvious. Not even two of them had been enough to take on the War God's dragon. This little one wasn't sure what to do. It glanced at Krai as it continued to retreat 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. The Black Dragon began to step towards it slowly, limping from the pain in its leg. Krai growled again, pleading. Nothing moved.

Suddenly, the mountain started to grow, as if it had taken a sharp inhale, and the rubble began to shift. Blue scales started to uncover from the mess, as Sire struggled to free itself. The dragon had been injured and stumbled several times before it could fully get its body out. Krai walked over and both dragons briefly sniffed the other. Both of the siblings were in pitiful states. Krai had some sizable injuries from the fights, and was covered in both its own blood and that of the dragons it had fought today. It was so much that the dragon's black scales were actually shining with a lustrous red under the sun. Sire was just covered in dust, but its body had been mauled in several places by the rocks, some of the blue scales had even fallen off or been damaged. Its foreleg couldn't even seem to bear the weight of its body, its paw kept giving way with each step taken.

Sire suddenly turned its head towards the misshapen dragon that was left behind. The Blue Dragon growled, its eyes shining with recognition and malicious intent. 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 will to fight, the panic could be seen in its eyes as Sire came closer, growling furiously. The Blue Dragon, despite its injuries and

damaged scales, was still in much better shape than Krai, and angrier too. This battle was about to end.

Meanwhile, Krai didn't even care to look at the massacre going on behind. Its ears barely twitched, no matter how loud the younger dragon's screeches were. The Black Dragon kept staring at the rubble, frozen in front of the pile of rocks. Krai didn't move, waiting, the ruby eyes looking over as if it was expecting something.

Krai softly growled again. With its snout, pushed at the rocks, sniffing around to find her. The Black Dragon lifted its injured paw to start digging. It was like a dog, sniffing through the rubble, searching desperately. Behind Krai, Sire was done with the bloody work and watched without moving.

"Krai!" A male voice called.

The Black Dragon didn't turn its head. It just kept digging, its movements getting more impatient than the last. Its claws were not made for such tasks, and the dragon growled in frustration every time it moved another rock.

"Krai!"

Kairen was confused. What was his dragon doing?

The War God stepped forward, ignoring his own pain. He was covered in black scales, especially his chest which was bare and covered in them and blood. A large portion of his face was also breaking out in the black scales, where the flesh was slowly recovering from deep burns. One couldn't even distinguish the injuries anymore, his body just looked like it was half-way through some mythical transformation.

A wave of worry started invading his heart. His eyes glanced over to the dead dragons near Sire, but he just took the sight in. He was focused more on Krai, who was digging anxiously through a mountain of debris.

Kairen started running. Panic was overwhelming his senses. He threw down the dragon's head he was carrying, and ran as fast as he could across the Arena. He had a bad feeling. He never had that extra sense, intuition, but Krai's desperation was going to his head, like a horrible, nagging shadow encompassing his mind. He didn't allow himself to think. Kairen ran until he was in front of the pile and then he started digging too.

For a while, the only sound was the two of them, the Prince and his dragon, endlessly digging through a mountain of rocks, searching everywhere they could. They were so frantic, their labored breathing and the ruckus of the stones being tossed was the only thing that could be heard in the stadium. Sire stood a few feet away, watching somberly.

“What are they doing?”

The Blue Dragon turned its head to look at the source of the words. Stumbling in at one of the Arena’s entrances, Shareen was frowning and grimaced with each step, as she was in bad shape too. A large and deep gash was running from her left temple down to her jaw, still bleeding a bit from behind the little, dark purple scales. Her left ear was also cut open, and on the other side, she had another cut on her eyebrow causing her to unwillingly blink because of the scales covering it.

The top of her armor was gone, her exposed shoulder bearing another sizable injury, a large and clear bite mark that was still bleeding down her side. Her purple outfit was drenched in the reddish color of drying blood. She was walking slowly, as if taking each step was incredibly painful, and held her wrist against her flank, her hand now gone.

She came closer, still not quite understanding what her brother and his dragon were looking for.

But they just kept digging, looking for a sign. A movement. Anything.

“Cassandra!” Kairen suddenly yelled, unable to hold it in anymore.

His voice echoed throughout the arena, and Shareen’s face sank.

“She can’t be under... that...” she muttered.

The Princess hurried to her brother’s side, and though she didn’t want to know what they were going to find, she started to dig as well. It was slow progress. Sire looked on as if they were crazy.

“Cassandra! Cassandra!”

The War God’s voice echoed along with his dragon’s growls. They kept rummaging through the rocks in a deathly silence. Shareen didn’t want to say the words, but she knew there was no way.

Nothing under this rubble could have survived.

“Cassandra!”

She swallowed and kept going. Rock after rock, stone after stone, they kept digging, skinning their fingers and breaking their nails until they bled. Suddenly, after pulling her 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 take it in.

“Kairen!”

This time, he turned around, and seeing her expression, his heart sank. The War God ran down the little hill he was standing on. His eyes opened wide upon seeing what she had found.

“Cassandra!”

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

She wasn’t moving.

Her eyes were closed, lying in his arms like an inanimate doll. Her white skin was covered in bruises, her left leg was at a horribly unnatural angle, and her feet were dangling freely at the ankle. A layer of dust covered her skin and hair, she looked as if she was part of the stones themselves.

The War God gasped, unable to accept what he was seeing, what he was holding. It was something that he just couldn’t fathom was right before his eyes. His hands were shaking under Cassandra’s body. They had never shaken before.

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

Shareen bit her lip, unable to say anything, not even to 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, even her lips were tinted

with some red. Yet, her skin had never seemed so grey. She had never seemed so petite and fragile 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 death not to take her. Krai wasn't making a sound. The dragon was crouching down, approaching in very small steps, as if it was...scared. The Black Dragon sniffed Cassandra's hand, laid on the ground, and slowly started retreating, letting out a pitiful wailing sound along the way.

Shareen had to look away, she couldn't take it anymore. It was painful to hear her brother, to hear them call her name, again, and again, and again, like madmen. She couldn't utter a word though. If she did, she would have broken down too. She was a strong woman, and few things could shake her, but this was one of those things. Cassandra like this, and Kairen breaking over it. They were used to death, they always had been. But this was worse. Even more unbearable. It wasn't possible to accept it, not like this.

As she was avoiding the scene, Shareen caught sight of something else - some movement underneath the pile of rocks. She frowned and walked towards it. As she got closer, a sound resonated from it, like the 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 peered through. It was moving, but they were merely tremors. The Second Prince was groaning, pinned under a mountain of rocks. He didn't look human anymore, his body had been crushed by the weight of the rubble. His dragon blood was just doing whatever it could, inside and out.

Shareen didn't even have enough energy in her to delight at his pitiful situation.

"Even the Gods don't think you deserved an easy death," she muttered.

Slowly, she removed one rock after another, until his head was completely out. His skull had been crushed, his head taking on an odd shape that was nothing close to normal. But the red scales were still appearing here and there. Shareen grabbed a rock that was about half the size of her fist, gauged the weight a bit in her hand, and turned to him again. She brought her face down to his so he could hear her.

“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 every time, just like the damn cockroach you are.”

Then, she raised the rock and smashed his face. She raised it again and smiled with satisfaction, and smashed him again. Once just wasn’t enough. She had chosen a flat, not too heavy one on purpose. Shareen hit him over and over again, looking into his eyes each time she raised it, channeling all the rage she could into each hit. His dragon blood could try as much as it wanted to keep up, but she’d just keep going. There was so much that needed to be thrown in his face. All the suffering he deserved, everything. It came through in each blow from that rock. His blood splattered around them, on her hands, her body, and on her face. Her grip didn’t loosen from around that rock, no matter how much it hurt. Each groan of agony he uttered offered a bit of relief, that some justice was being done for those who had suffered.

Shareen wanted to be sure he saw it all, that he died being able to see and know that he had truly lost. She kept smashing his face until nothing but a bloody crater was left. Only then, did her shaking hand let go of the rock. It tumbled down, landing 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, took it out of that graveyard and threw it on some open ground. Krai and Sire both growled furiously, but before they could react, Shareen took a deep breath in and exhaled her fire. The corpse started burning immediately.

That bastard didn’t deserve any physical reminders of him to remain in this world.

Once it was all over, it became quiet in the Arena again. There was a silence hanging over the place, casting a shadow despite the clear sky. It just didn’t feel right. Shareen looked around at the deserted Arena. This place was empty most of the year, and when it was in use, it was just 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 change.

Shareen closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She wiped off the blood dripping down her chin, and with a heavy heart, turned to her brother. Next to him, Krai was still waiting there with its head low, not moving.

“Kairen. We have to go,” she said.

She was expecting her brother to ignore her, but he stood up slowly, still cradling Cassandra against his chest. Both dragons turned their heads and watched him go ahead, before following in his steps as he slowly left the Arena. Shareen looked on after her brother. She glanced one last time towards the ashes and the pile of rocks before spitting on the black dust and turning to follow her family to leave this place.

They walked slowly back towards the Palace, neither of the dragons looked like they even had enough strength left to fly. Krai was closely following Kairen, and even when the dragon had to switch to the roof of the narrow corridors, its steps were heard clearly right above them. Sire hadn't followed them back inside. The Blue Dragon parted ways with them, heading for a more familiar area of the castle. It was easy to understand the Blue Dragon had other humans to be more concerned about.

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

“Brother! We...”

Anour stopped talking, his eyes going down to the body in Kairen's arms. The young Prince's eyes widened in shock, and soon overflowed with sorrow.

“No... She...”

No one answered him. He gasped and covered his mouth, not daring to move when Kairen walked past him. The youngest Prince raised his eyes towards Shareen as if to ask, but he couldn't formulate the words. She glanced at him briefly, and then they both followed the War God.

“The...fight outside is over,” said Anour, almost in a whisper.

They could hear it. From far above the Imperial Palace's walls, the cheers of soldiers could be lightly heard. Shareen wanted to go out and slap them one by one. There shouldn't be any cheering right now. Not after what happened, the tragedy that had unfolded. She didn't want to hear those idiots.

“Where is Mother? And Missandra?” Asked Shareen.

“They're with Roun,” said Anour. “Missandra was badly injured, but Lady Kareen found an Imperial Healer to look over her, and Phemera, too. He said they will both make it. Everything had quietened down 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, worried, before turning back to her.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "Maybe...It's better if they get a chance to say goodbye."

The youngest Prince gulped, looking like he was repressing some tears himself, and nodded somberly before leaving. Shareen sighed, and continued after her brother. She didn't know where he was going with her, she couldn't even tell if he had a destination in mind.

Kairen seemed like he was just wandering aimlessly through the Palace's corridors, while carrying her body in silence. But after a few more turns, she recognized the direction they were going; towards the Lake.

She frowned. They had heard some incredible story from their brother while on their way to the Arena before, but... Why was he thinking of going back there now? That crazy tale Opheus had told them about some gigantic dragon hidden in the Lake, couldn't be true...could it?

Shareen didn't say a thing though, and just followed after him. No matter what he tried, said, or did now, she probably wouldn't be able to find it in herself to stop him anyway. She had never stood against her brother, and she wasn't about to start, certainly not now. They walked up to the Lake, where Opheus was sitting in the grass with his hand on his dragon. Both Lys and Glahad next to him looked exhausted and covered in injuries, yet they all raised their heads as the group walked into the garden.

The Golden Dragon couldn't move, but growled softly. It was clearly exhausted, lying on its flank. It had fought a lot today. They all had. Krai, too, walked heavily on the grass, coming up to Kairen's side. The Black Dragon had never looked so sad as it laid there, its head tilted towards them.

Opheus struggled to get up as his eyes were riveted on Kairen and Cassandra. He didn't say a thing, but his expression was beyond words. The sight had him choked up and tongue tied. He watched his older brother approach the Lake and fall to his knees at the strand. He was holding Cassandra as if she was simply sleeping, her head against his neck, his large hands holding her tenderly.

“Please...”

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 or how to do this. This was Cassandra's world, not his. He knew nothing. The War God took a deep breath, and after a moment of hesitation, he uttered the only word he could think of.

“Almien.”

He looked at the Lake, but nothing moved, so he took a deep breath and repeated it, over and over, like a prayer. He hugged Cassandra and begged for her God to come save her.

Shareen stood to the back with her arms crossed, skeptical of what her brother was trying to do. Opheus glanced at the surface too, unsure. Would the creature answer their call? After what they had done... Kairen looked down at Cassandra. After they had done this to her? To her people? He exchanged a quick glance with Shareen. The Princess didn't believe in this, but she wouldn't stop him from trying. She knew there was nothing else he could do but try.

“Oh, by the Gods... Cassie...”

They both turned around. Lady Kareen had arrived with baby Kassian in her arms, followed closely by Anour. Somehow, Kian had found its way to the concubine and was trotting at her feet, looking just fine and unaware of what was going on. Missandra had not come with them, she was likely not in a state to move. Perhaps it was better, in a way, Shareen thought. She'd be spared the vision of her older sister lying lifeless in the War God's arms.

From his grandmother's arms, Kassian began crying. Kian retreated, no longer looking joyful and excited. The young dragon was almost hiding behind Kareen, peeking out from behind her towards the Lake and whimpering in distress. The scene was just heartbreaking. Kareen didn't even try to soothe her grandson. The Imperial Concubine had her eyes fixated on her son, who looked just completely devastated. She sighed and held Kassian a bit tighter, rubbing his back and whispering gently to him. She shook her head, there was nothing else even she could do.

Suddenly, the surface of the lake began to tremble. They all turned their eyes towards the shapes that appeared there. The ripples started spreading throughout the whole Lake, and somehow, the atmosphere around them became humid, which never happened in the dry, hot Dragon Empire.

Shareen and her mother exchanged a look, completely stunned. They had lived in this Palace for years, explored every corner of it and knew every secret of the Emperor, but the biggest secret didn't belong to their human realm. It came in the shape of a magnificent Creature that surfaced out of the lake for a girl.

The Water God emerged from the water, its head coming up to Kairen. It moved like a snake, slowly swimming just under the surface, large arches of its body randomly breaking through the surface before disappearing again. One could only imagine the actual length and size of the Creature. Opheus glanced towards the dragons, but none of them looked surprised or seemed cautious. In fact, they were all lowering their heads, as if the Water dragon in front of them was some venerable deity, a being they were naturally intimidated by. They hadn't reacted the same earlier in the midst of the battle, but now there was a clear line between the Imperial Dragons and this Water God.

Kairen raised his eyes at the Creature that stood tall above him. For once, the War God was the one being looked down upon, but he didn't care the slightest.

His eyes were red with grief. He just couldn't accept it, he didn't want to admit this reality. And yet, as the Water God stood tall in front of him, he remained quiet. There was a very strange atmosphere between the two.

He was holding Cassandra. She looked so light in his arms. The girl from the Rain Tribe. The girl his Empire had taken from her people, from the life she should have had, and turned her into a slave. They should never have met. They were born into two very different worlds; worlds that were not suited for each other. The moment she had been brought to this Empire, she wasn't meant to survive. She was brought here to suffer and then die. To become a slave.

And yet, of all people, the War God had fallen for that woman, and he had been a bit of light for her in the darkness. They had spent a little over a year together, but she had become everything to him. She had flourished despite the obstacles, like a flower that had managed to bloom in the dirt. The Water Lily. The Lady of the Mountain.

Wherever she had ended up, she survived without complaint and grew. Standing brave against everything his people had thrown at her. She had never even become resentful towards them. Cassandra stayed the same sweet girl from the Rain Tribe, and she changed the people around her.

Kairen was sitting there, lost, just looking at the Water God. What had he come here to do? Beg for a second chance? For Cassandra to be returned to him? He was sitting in front of her God, with her body in his arms. What would he dare beg for? The

Water God had heard the Requiem of one of his last daughters. No one knew what linked them, but he was presenting her body to that God, and begging for a second chance. To bring her back into this terrible world? How could he ask for a miracle, when he had brought nothing but chaos?

The Water God was towering there, waiting. No one could say how much time had really passed, while those two Gods simply stared at each other. It was like some silent negotiation was happening between them, yet no words were exchanged.

In Kareen's eyes, her son was paying the heavy price for many other people's wrongdoings. He was the one who had to carry his lover's body, the mother of his son lying in his arms. He had to live with the reality that he had been too late to save her, and that he was partially responsible for her death. Because he had fallen in love with her, so many things had happened. No one knew why the Black Dragon had tied their destinies together. Maybe the War God needed to learn about love? Maybe it was to give Cassandra more time to do all the good she could? There was something both beautiful and tragic about the couple's fate.

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

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

He raised his dead eyes to the Water God, and bowed lowly.

Kairen had never bowed to anyone before, but now, this man had bent so low, his face was almost touching the water.

"I'm so sorry."

Those three words were spoken so softly, no one else could hear them. The Water God let out a long, low-pitched sound that resonated within the garden walls and beyond. It was as if it had been waiting for this moment. Then, it leaned down to Cassandra, its head right next to hers, and took a deep breath in. When its mouth opened again, it exhaled a very thin, white mist.

They were confused at first until they realized the white mist was slowly coating Cassandra. The air chilled some more, turning the mist on her skin to ice as the layers grew thicker. Soon, her skin turned whiter than it had ever been. It was like seeing a ghost disappear in the snow. Her lips turned purple and then blue.

Kairen wouldn't take his eyes off her until the Water God stopped the ice forming. Then, with an angrier and louder growl, it suddenly moved closer and wrapped its body around her. One of its paws grabbed her arm to keep her in place, but the Creature's eyes were on Kairen the entire time. The War God didn't seem to notice though, and he didn't dare to retreat from the closeness of the Creature either. He just watched it take her, unmoving.

With a final, long growl, the Water God slowly slinked back into the Lake, taking Cassandra with it and disappearing just like that. After a while, the surface of the water hadn't moved again and went back to being a quiet, peaceful Lake.

Shareen sighed. So it was over. Whatever that thing was...it had taken Cassandra's body down, deep into the lake. Shareen didn't know what to feel anymore, it was all just too much to handle. She took a deep breath and glanced towards her mother. Lady Kareen was looking at her son wearing the saddest expression, but she didn't go to him. She knew there were no words she could say that would console him. Her eyes fell to Kassian then, who was still crying a bit, though it seemed that he had tired himself out too much to keep on wailing.

Anour and Opheus had the same horrified expression on their faces. Everyone was staring at Kairen, left there alone to face the quiet Lake. No one knew what to do next.

Krai was the first to move. The Black Dragon walked to its master's side and curled up around him. It seemed like the dragon and Prince were one being at that moment, facing the quiet Lake, united in their loss.

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

"I'll go take care of the crap outside and make sure we are done with everything... whatever'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 his forehead while, at her feet, Kian curled up around her, his eyes turned towards the Lake. It looked like the Baby Dragon was confused about what had happened and didn't dare approach. Instead, it stayed with

Kareen who was patiently waiting for her son to come out of this trance. She would wait no matter how long it would take.

Opheus and Anour walked up to Shareen. The Fourth Prince was wiping his tears, clearly shaken up. They hesitated before speaking, almost at a loss for what to say.

“What now?” asked Anour.

“You’ll stay with Missandra and Phemera.”

The Sixth Prince’s expression sank.

“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 trade and you can be the one to take care of the fucking mess outside and deal with the politics. Your pick.”

He looked down, defeated. Indeed, he was the one closest to Missandra, and he wouldn’t be able to help anywhere else... it didn’t make his task any easier though. Anour nodded and, with a sigh, the youngest Prince glanced at Opheus and left with a solemn expression.

The Fourth Prince crossed his arms.

“You were a bit harsh on him.”

“I’m not in the mood to indulge anyone’s sensitivities right now.”

Her brother frowned 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, and whomever. It’s high time that things change around here, and it’s starting today.”

“Do you think they are going to listen though?”

“They listened to that rat. So now, they either have an open ear for us, or those bastards can join him in hell. I’ll send them there myself. They should start working on it now if they want us to let them live another day after what happened here. Those

damn... tsk. Anyway, you can bring Lephys' body along if they need help being convinced. At least that bastard can 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 was silent once again. Kareen was left alone to contemplate her son's loneliness. In her arms, Kassian had given in and was sleeping, his little eyes still red and puffy from all the crying. His grandmother sighed. The poor boy had no idea what a hero his mother was. Cassandra had never been a fighter, but she was someone who would sacrifice herself for others to survive, and 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 as they stayed like that in the garden. Nothing really moved, except for the wind blowing gently around them. Kareen, tired of standing, walked across the garden and came to sit near poor Glahad. The old Golden Dragon put its head against her lap, its ruby eyes focused on the concubine. She sighed and stroked its golden scales.

"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 old man. At least you will stay with me a little bit longer, won't you? To help watch over the children. He's left them with nothing but a mess."

The Golden Dragon growled softly and closed its eyes, gently rubbing its face against her hip. The elder dragon looked incredibly tired. Kian, who had been left behind, now slowly walked up to them and curled up under Glahad's wing. A little ball of silver scales, the Baby Dragon rolled itself up against its flank, lowering its head with a sad look. From the little enclave, its little emerald eyes could watch Krai and Kairen on the other side of the Lake, unchanged in their stillness.

Kairen had been sitting there for a very long time already, yet he was still just staring at the surface of the lake. He wasn't even expecting anything at this point, his expression was just blank and emotionless. Abandoned. Man and Dragon remained there, like statues, until the sun started going down and the sky turned orange. On his knees, he didn't move; it was like time had stopped in this place.

Voices began to echo through the halls from elsewhere in the Palace as the world resumed without them. Somewhere else, Shareen was discussing with the Imperial Generals, giving orders to clear the streets and round up the traitors. Opheus was threatening the council, clearing up dirty money, and deciding who deserved a second chance at redemption. His dragon, Phe, had followed him, limping to go and help him on the other side of the Palace. Anour was trying to console a crying girl, grieving for her older sister. Life was not resuming peacefully, it couldn't after all the chaos that had been spread around the Palace.

Kassian woke up too as the world resumed. The baby didn't know anything about war, but he knew he was hungry. He started to whine a bit in Kareen's arms. Just as she was about to try and soothe him, she was surprised to see that, across the lake, Kairen was finally leaving his trance and standing up.

While his dragon didn't move, the War God silently left the shore and walked around to his mother. A bit surprised, Kareen stood too and waited for him. He didn't look like the same man as before. Something was broken inside him, she could see it in his eyes. It wasn't about the injuries or the exhaustion. When he came to her, his eyes went directly to his Son, and for a second, there was a spark of something there. Kairen gently took Kassian in his arms and the baby stopped his wailing, only a few tears sliding down his cheeks after. He squirmed a bit in his father's arms, but only as if adjusting to a more comfortable position. The black scales still trying to heal Kairen's body probably weren't too agreeable for him either, but his father's warm skin was enough to calm him down.

Kairen spent a long time staring at his son.

"What do you want to do now?" Kareen asked gently.

"She hated this place."

The concubine slowly nodded. It was only right that 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 written in his eyes. It may have been even 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 was all she needed. Although she was going through her own mourning, Kareen knew it was without comparison to her son’s sorrow. After some hesitation, she raised her hand and gently touched his arm.

It was just a light touch on his skin, just for reassurance, for him to feel that she was there. She’d always be there for him.

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

And just like that, she watched Kairen go, carrying his son and his grief. Kian sent a glance her way, a bit unsure of what to do. The young dragon eventually followed, scurrying up behind Kairen and sending reassuring glances. Kareen watched them leave until they were out of sight, and then turned her attention back towards the Lake.

Krai was still there, still lying by the water, having not moved at all. The dragon was exactly where its Master’s heart had been left. No one could tell if it was waiting, or simply abandoned. The Black Dragon was as frozen as a statue, its ruby eyes reflecting nothing but the Lake. It didn’t even seem to care about life anymore. Kareen’s heart broke once more for her son’s dragon. It would remain here forever, she could see it. The Imperial Concubine repressed the cries in her heart and walked out of the garden.

She hated this place too. Kareen had seen too many children die within these walls. If a new age had finally come, it would happen without her. She was an old woman with no strength left to give. She would no longer be the untouchable Imperial Concubine, if she had ever really been... Nothing was tying her to this place, nothing ever had. Next to her, Glahad growled softly, pushing against her hip a little. She smiled half-heartedly, caressing the golden snout again.

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

The dragon growled again as Kareen walked away. She took a different direction than the one her son had taken, heading back to the place where they had hidden earlier. As she got closer, she could hear the screams. Missandra’s wailing was unbearable, but Kareen took a deep breath and went in. She didn’t flinch upon seeing the younger sister’s distress, or Anour’s attempts to calm her down. No one could blame her after losing her sister in such a horrific way. Missandra was mourning.

Kareen's heart ached for the girl. In a way, they were a lot alike. Though she loved Cassandra dearly, the Imperial Concubine saw a lot of herself in the younger sister. She knew Missandra would move on and become stronger from this. They were the type of women who always grew stronger in order to survive, turning their anger and fear into rage. She only hoped Missandra would be able to open her heart again in spite of all this. That child needed to learn how to love and trust people again.

Kareen hadn't come back here to console Missandra though. She took a deep breath and opened a room that had been locked until now. Inside, Phetra was there, tied to a chair, her face ruined by her tears. Her eyes had grown wide and red from terror. Maybe she knew what had happened to her brother, but as soon as she saw Kareen, her panic increased. Despite being gagged, she started wailing even more loudly and trying to break free from the chair.

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

"Please! Please spare me! I didn't want to! Vrehan forced me! 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?" Kareen asked calmly, ignoring her pleas.

"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 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 little thing, aren't you?"

As she said that, Kareen took a dagger out from the pocket of her dress, causing Phetra to 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 me. We all have things to protect, things we’d dirty our hands for.”

And in one swift movement, she killed Phetra. The Princess and her chair fell to the floor, her throat sliced open. Her eyes were still twitching, her face laying in the growing puddle of blood that would be her final vision. Kareen stepped back to avoid stepping in it, and slowly wiped the splatter from her dress. One final act, so that it could truly be over.

She simply walked out after that, closing the door behind her. Kareen took a deep breath and walked back into the Palace. She could already feel the winds of change that were overtaking this place’s filthy air. Her steps took her to another corridor. No one was there yet. Everyone was busy elsewhere, with whatever was going to come next. Kareen opened the door to the Emperor’s Chambers.

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

“You really were selfish to the end,” she whispered. “Leaving me and your children with this mess... Was this what you wanted? To die and leave all the trouble you caused, you old man? You could never abandon a single one of them, and yet, look where it got you... Death 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 a statue. She had once loved this man. She had given him many, many nights alone, before she had to put the lives of the children they had created together first.

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

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

A magnificent golden dress.