

Chapter 14

As soon as Missandra was gone, Cassandra couldn't help but cry again. Dahlia tried to get some herbal tea prepared for her, but she didn't touch it and only sobbed in the War God's arms for a long time. It was the first time Cassandra had felt so powerless and defeated. She could stand being injured herself, but seeing her loved ones being injured was the worst thing possible for her. She hated having to wait for her sister to come back after her punishment. She wouldn't be able to do anything for her until then.

Kairen didn't say anything. He wasn't good at comforting her, aside from holding her in his arms, and caressing her hair. His physical contact was the only thing seemingly able to comfort Cassandra a bit, as she stayed curled up in his arms for a long time. Even Krai had arrived in the garden, growling so softly it was almost a whistle, putting its head next to Cassandra, looking sorry for her.

Kareen couldn't seem to sit still. The Imperial Concubine paced around, ordering the servants to do useless things. She kept going in and out of the garden, fidgety. Kareen was a proud woman and hated being powerless. The young sisters had grown on her, even the belligerent Missandra. She felt partially responsible for her punishment too. If she hadn't pushed for her to come with them... No, it wouldn't have changed anything anyway. Vrehan had gotten what he really wanted. To harm Cassandra indirectly, he took aim at the only person he could openly attack in Kairen's entourage. She felt even madder thinking about that brat. They needed to be ready in case something else happened, or even better, give him payback. He had probably already got one, though. Though he had been careful not to show it, Phetra was his closest sister, her downfall was probably painful to him as well. Compared to that, the punishment befallen on Missandra felt too light, even.

"I can't sit still," suddenly declared Cassandra.

The young concubine stood up, surprising everyone around.

"Lady Cassandra, we should wait for Lady Missandra," said Dahlia, worried for her.

"No. I'm counting mentally, again and again, if I keep imagining it without doing anything, I'll go crazy. I need to do something. I want to prepare the medicine for when she gets back. I want to go to my garden."

“You are not leaving my apartments!” roared Kareen, wary like a lioness. “Cassandra, you should stay here for now!”

However, Kairen stood next to Cassandra and took her hand.

“I will go with her,” he declared.

Despite his apparent calm, Kareen knew her son was probably as frustrated as she was. He hadn’t said anything, but seeing Cassandra so sad and miserable probably affected him as well. Krai stood up too, looking curious about the change of situation.

The Imperial Concubine sighed.

“Fine! But you two come back here as soon as that ointment is done! Shareen will bring her back here anyway.”

Cassandra nodded, and left, followed closely by the Prince. Kareen sighed and sat in the chair she had just left. Krai, who couldn’t follow them, growled too and put its head on the Imperial Concubine’s lap. She scratched its snout.

“Those children,” she sighed.

Meanwhile, Cassandra was hurrying back to the prince’s apartments. She was aiming right for her herbal garden, still holding Kairen’s hand. She had nothing else in mind but her sister. She wasn’t scared at the moment, just focused.

As soon as she got there, she let go of his hand and started gathering everything she needed in a hurry. In a few minutes, she had gathered enough herbs and water, and started working on it at her little table, a determined expression on face. Her eyes were still red, but she didn’t care.

Kairen let her do whatever she wanted. He understood she needed to keep herself busy to forget about all her sadness and frustration. Something else actually caught his attention. One spot of the grass was still humid and muddy, where the girls had fought with Phetra just a couple of hours earlier. He circled the area, and suddenly spotted Phetra’s dagger, still lying at the bottom of one of the fountains. With a frown, he took it out, observing it. It was a good weapon, but it hadn’t been taken care of properly.

For a while, the garden was relatively silent. Cassandra was focused on making the best ointment possible, crushing her herbs into a mortar, adding water and preparing some kind of green medicinal paste. She then moved on to a second medicine, a pain-

killer decoction. At the same time, Kairen was sitting near her, and had begun sanding and sharpening the dagger. He scraped off all the unnecessary decorations that added to its weight, letting the little diamonds and rubies fall on the grass without a care.

After several minutes, Cassandra assembled everything she had prepared in front of her, shaking her head.

“I don’t know if this will be enough,” she said, looking defeated.

The Prince stood up, and looked at the table. She had made a pitcher full of ointment, and a large glass of medicine, too. It would probably be enough, even for two people.

“Let’s go back,” he declared.

“Maybe I can make more,” she said. “I can find something else to ease the pain, or make it less bitter, or make more of it...”

“Cassandra, it’s enough. Let’s go back.”

“But...”

“Enough.”

She bit her lip, and Kairen grabbed her chin to have her finally look at him instead of the medicine. His deep black eyes almost took her by surprise.

“It’s been over an hour,” he said, gently but firmly. “Let’s go. Your sister will be back soon.”

“I...”

Forced to confront his eyes, Cassandra suddenly felt like crying again. She shook her head, but the tears came anyway. She covered her eyes.

“I... I had promised our mother I would protect her... I can’t believe... I’m such a bad sister... I shouldn’t have brought her here.”

The Prince sighed, and gently had her let go of her tools. He took her into his strong embrace to try and calm her down. It had been a while since she had cried so much.

Cassandra had only really cried three times since he had met her. The first time was out of fear for him, when he was locked up by his father. The second time, it was out of anger, for the slaves, when the slave traders showed no compassion. Now, she was

crying for her younger sister. It seemed like that girl always cried more for others than herself, when she was the one who had been going through so much.

Her own scars, from being whipped so many times, added up to much more than a hundred or two. There wasn't a spot on her skin that didn't have one of those white, thin lines he hated. Given that Cassandra's skin was among the whitest possible, the scars were sometimes harder to see, and sometimes very visible, like little silver threads, but Kairen felt it under his fingers anytime he caressed her. That precious, frail body he adored had been mistreated until it got like this. Her legs, her arms, her back, her chest... There wasn't an area that had been spared. She even had some on the back of her hands, and on her neck, though the spot where she formerly had a collar had been protected by the metal. His blood would boil just thinking about all the pain she had been inflicted.

"What if she dies? Kairen, if something happens to my sister, I..."

"Cassandra, look at me."

She lifted her head. Her eyes, full of tears, were the most dangerous weapon against him. He put his hands around her neck, his fingers in her hair, and gently caressed her cheek with his thumb.

"Your sister will be fine. As soon as she comes out of there, and can travel, I will send her to the Diamond Palace with my mother. I will get her out of here, and as soon as these damn Celebrations are over, we will, too. It's my promise to you."

Cassandra nodded weakly, but her heart wasn't at peace. She felt like she was going to crumble at any moment.

"Can I be honest for a minute?" she said.

"What is it?"

"I don't want you to be an Emperor."

Kairen wasn't exactly surprised by her words, but it was certainly the first time she said something like that. He frowned, a bit confused.

"I thought you said..."

"I know what I said," sighed Cassandra, pushing him a bit. "I... There's a part of me, a selfish part of me, that wishes we could leave, just the two of us, and our family. Go

far from all the Politics, the murders, the plots, and everyone who wants to harm us. I want... If I could live in a dream, it would be anywhere but this Empire. I...don't want to give birth to children and worry about which ones will be killed. I don't want the jewels, the dresses, the fancy banquets... I just want you, our people, and our baby, living in peace. I want to bear your children, and get old with you. I could hop on Krai's back and let your dragon take us anywhere. But..."

She took a deep breath, calming herself down, closing her eyes.

"There is also a part of me that wants you to change this Empire. I hate... I hate this Dragon Empire, Kairen. Everything is wrong with it. I hate how you and your brothers can kill people without remorse. How slaves and servants are treated like disposable livestock. How women are seen as merchandise, even Princesses. How you see the destruction of my people as nothing more than some unfortunate event from the past. I... I was raised with the idea that life and death are sacred, and must be honored. Your people don't care about life, and they don't even respect the dead."

"Cassandra..."

She shook her head, asking him to let her speak a bit longer.

"That day, in the arena... I was ready to die. I didn't care about the Imperial Games. I wasn't scared, I had no more expectations for life. However, of all people, you chose me. The moment when Krai dropped me at your feet, and you put that little piece of your coat on my shoulders, something in me changed a little. Since we met, every day, I have been seeing what a wonderful, loving man you are. You don't care about gender when you interact with people. You respect your siblings based on their skills, not their gender. You kill when you have to, not when you want. You protect those you love... and punish those who deserve to be punished. You are not perfect, but... You are the kind of man that could change this Empire into a country I can love."

The Prince was very still, listening to every word. Cassandra's voice was hoarse because of all of her earlier crying, softer and huskier than usual. She was almost whispering.

"If a man like Vrehan becomes Emperor, this will go on. People will die unfairly, women like Missandra will be treated poorly. Truth is, if I believed any of your brothers could do this better than you, I would root for them to take the Golden Throne. But... I have seen what they can do, and it isn't what you can do. They can't take an abused, damaged woman, forget about her appearance and still be able to see her value. To turn her into an Imperial Physician. They can't respect their sisters like their equals. They can't have empathy for slaves, servants, or for their people. They

live in Golden Palaces, while you're fine with eating and sleeping in a camp. You are not like them, my love. This is exactly why you made me fall for you, and why I believe you should be the next Emperor, even if it breaks my heart."

Kairen gently caressed her arm. He understood everything she said, however, there was one thing that was worrying the War God at that moment, and he couldn't not say it.

"I am not leaving you," he said.

Somehow, he felt as if, at one point, all of this was going to be too much for her. That fragile woman, no matter how strong her heart was, would reach her limit, and be unable to follow whichever path he was fated to follow. Kairen didn't want that. Of all the things he had ever desired, since the moment he had laid his eyes on her, there wasn't a single one that didn't include Cassandra.

"I know," Cassandra chuckled. "I won't leave you either. Your fate will be mine, my Prince, I promise. I've come to peace with that already. Don't worry."

He sighed, and once again, hugged her closely. Cassandra felt relieved he had understood what had been hidden in her heart for a while now. Even for her, it had been so hard to deal with the whole situation, and to come to terms with what she truly wanted. However, she knew one thing for sure: she wanted to stay by this man's side.

She stayed in his embrace for as long as it took for her to calm down. Once her tears were dry, and her heart a bit more at peace, she sighed and took a step back with a chuckle.

"I really want to see our son soon."

Kairen nodded, caressing her tummy.

"Let's have many children," he said.

"Why many?"

"You look better when you're pregnant."

Cassandra chuckled, amused. She knew what he meant, but his way with words was really too much. She softly kissed him.

“I won’t suddenly go back to being skinny after our son is born, Kairen. But I am fine with having many. I would love a big family.”

She took a deep breath, feeling a bit better, and turned to her little table.

“Alright, time to go back.”

The Prince nodded and helped her take the medicine back to Kareen’s apartments. Kareen and Krai were still in the same position, Dahlia standing a few steps behind, but strangely, Missandra and Shareen hadn’t come back yet. Cassandra put her medicine down on a little table the Imperial Concubine had in the garden, and sat, worried.

It only took a few seconds, though. Suddenly they heard a commotion from the entrance of the garden. The servants went rushing, and Cassandra stood up. Shareen was carrying Missandra on her back. When she gently put her down on the chair, it was obvious the young girl had cried a lot. She looked exhausted, and the back of her dress was ripped open. Cassandra did her best not to cry again.

Her younger sister’s hair had been put to the side in a braid, so the first thing Cassandra saw was her back, covered in cuts, some deep and still bleeding fresh blood. As if it kept her from breaking down, Cassandra immediately ordered for her sister to be taken to a bedroom, and made to lay down so she could treat her. Before the servants even had a chance to move, Kairen gently lifted Missandra and carried her himself, followed by the little group.

“Your sister was brave. She didn’t even scream or beg. She endured it until it was over.”

“I...I’m fine,” Missandra said.

Her voice was so weak, she could pass out at any moment. Cassandra gently helped her take little sips of the medicinal water that could ease her pain, and kissed her cheek once she had drunk it all.

“It’s okay if you want to close your eyes, Linue. I will treat you,” she whispered.

“How did you...endure all that...”

But before she could end her sentence, Missandra’s tired eyes closed themselves, and she passed out, exhausted. Cassandra sighed, but it was half of a cry. She grabbed the towel that a servant had just brought, damped it in the clear water and started cleaning

her sister's injuries. The servant girl stepped forward, wanting to clean Missandra's injuries instead of letting the concubine dirty herself, but Kairen glared at her.

"Get out."

All of the servants cleared the room in a couple of seconds. Kareen sighed, caressing Missandra's head and hair gently.

"Poor thing..."

Shareen nodded. She had been truly impressed with the younger sister that day. Her resilience to take the pain without complaining had been admirable. Most people would openly scream and beg for mercy, but Missandra had done none of that. She had closed her eyes and muttered things silently, waiting for it to be over with.

Once the injuries were cleaned, Cassandra suddenly took a strand of her sister's hair, and started sewing her deepest and largest cuts, patiently. Kareen frowned.

"With her hair?"

"The body recognizes its own," whispered Cassandra. "It lessens the risks of infection,"

It was a technique she hadn't been able to use in the army, since the men's hair was cut short, but Missandra's hair was long and clean enough to be used to sew her injuries. With determination, Cassandra sewed each injury one by one. She was singing something softly, in their mother tongue, probably to soothe her sister.

"That song... Missandra was mumbling the same thing the whole time," said Shareen.

"It's the Water God's prayer. It's a very sad song."

She kept singing, softly, while applying the ointment on her sister's superficial injuries. At some point, she sang it again, in the Dragon Empire's language this time, for them to understand it too.

Ô God of Water

Will you hear this prayer

Will you hear your children

When they die under the sun

Ô God of Water

Will you hear and remember

The prayer of your daughters

For they cried alone

Ô God of Water

All your people's tears

Shall you ever hear

Please cry for us

Ô God of Water

If your children are gone

Please take them home

For you loved us

Ô God of Water

When I rest in your embrace

Please help me brace

The last river

Ô Father of Water

Let me dive and sleep

Won't you cry and weep

For you loved us

Ô Beloved Father

Please cry for my sisters

Please cry for your daughters

For you loved us

For you loved us.

When she was done, both singing and putting on the medicine, she took a long sigh, watching Missandra's resting figure. Her sister had aged a few years in just a couple of hours.

"It's the saddest shit I've ever heard," said Shareen.

"Our Elders sang it in times of pain and grief. Our legend said it was the last song of the last mermaids, sung before their death. It was a requiem. Our people made it a prayer."

"Do you really descend from mermaids?" asked Shareen curiously.

"Who knows. A long part of our history was forgotten, the other comes from tales and legends. It's hard to tell how much is true."

Cassandra didn't care much for their ancestors' secrets at that moment. She kept staring at her sister, hoping she could heal fast, and feel as little pain as possible.

"Anyway, with Missandra punished, that should settle it for Father," said Shareen.

"Your Second Brother won't be satisfied with that," retorted her mother. "This was only a small payback for how we insulted Phetra. He won't stop there. A servant came earlier to tell me the Princess has several bones broken and is suffering hell. He will want to pay that back."

"I'm getting Missandra out of here as soon as possible," said Cassandra. "I don't want my sister anywhere near where she could be hurt again."

"Don't worry, we will make sure she can leave quietly."

Cassandra stood up, shaking her head.

"She needs to rest for now. The journey to the Diamond Castle would be too much to handle for her in this state. Hopefully, she will be fine by the end of the Celebrations, and we can all leave together."

“Only four days to go,” said Kareen. “Missandra won’t leave my apartments until then, so she can rest and stay safe. I promise nothing can happen to her here.”

Cassandra weakly nodded. She didn’t feel like going back to the Celebrations for the day, anyway. She didn’t care what the Emperor would say, she didn’t want to indulge a man who had inflicted that to her younger sister, no matter what.

“Can I dine here tonight?” she asked.

“Of course, Cassie. That old fart won’t dare protest if we say you feel unwell. Let’s just have you rest here and do a little dinner together, alright?”

For the rest of the afternoon, Cassandra stayed by her sister’s side, with Dahlia. She didn’t want to leave her side until she woke up, and everyone understood that. Kairen, Shareen, and their mother gave the sisters some space, finding their own occupations in the Palace, though they stayed nearby.

At some point around the end of the afternoon, Cassandra needed to use the bathroom. She had stayed next to Missandra all this time and couldn’t take it anymore. She left Dahlia to watch her in her stead, and went to the closest bathroom.

Kareen’s apartments were vast, and among the prettiest in the Palace. There were many, many rooms for her to use, though she only seemed to use a few. Cassandra hadn’t gotten accustomed to the place yet. She was used to the Diamond Palace, but inside the Palace, a lot of corridors and doors looked the same. Somehow, she got lost on her way back to the room Missandra had been taken to. She might have taken a wrong turn somewhere, because, after a few minutes, she still wasn’t back. She knew she was still inside the Imperial Concubine’s apartments, she just had no idea where.

There was something strange in this area. Actually, she had thought about asking a servant for the way back, but this corridor was completely deserted. Cassandra was lost. This part of the Palace looked abandoned, nothing like Kareen’s rooms full of plants and life. In here, there was a deadly silence floating around, like a cathedral.

As she was trying to figure the way back, she came across what might have been a dining room, long ago. It was all dusty, and less refined than the one they actually used. Some cutlery had been forgotten in an old buffet, along with spiderwebs and dust.

Cassandra frowned. She didn’t understand why Kareen, who loved clean and decorated spaces, would leave a wing of her apartments empty like this. She kept walking until she found another corridor with rooms. All the doors looked alike, but

one caught her attention. It was torn down. Not like it had crumbled naturally, but like some beast had attacked it. The room was open, and, pushed by curiosity, she stepped in.

It was a child's room. There was a bed a bit smaller than the norm, some old furniture, and toys. She collected one that looked like a dragon plushie, left on the floor. It was cute, but old. Whose room was this? There was such a nostalgic feeling hanging in the air. Something deeply sad, too. Cassandra glanced around. There were toy blades, three of them, on top of a chest. So it was probably a boy's room. The desk still had some old books piled up, collecting dust. The library next to it as well. A bit further, something like a large couch made of straw was in a corner, a shape still visible in its center. Was it for some pet to sleep in? A dog, or...

"Cassandra."

She jumped and turned around. Kairen was standing a few steps behind her, outside of the room. She sighed in relief after that scare.

"Sorry. I got lost..."

"Come."

"Kairen... Whose room is this?"

The Prince hesitated, looking inside the room. He wasn't stepping in, which intrigued Cassandra even more. His eyes fell on the stuffed toy she was holding.

"It was mine."

Cassandra was surprised, though she was suspecting it already. The straw couch's indent was too large and deep for a regular animal. The size of it would be fitting if it was for a dragon... A young dragon.

"It's your...childhood bedroom?"

He nodded. Was it really? She thought it might have been one of his brothers', but... Cassandra couldn't imagine a Prince's room would have been left like this, even less if Kareen was in charge. Yet it felt completely abandoned, forgotten.

However, the way her Prince was standing outside, instead of coming to her, intrigued her as well. Something in his attitude didn't feel right, like he was wary of the room. He...loathed this place. She could tell just by looking at him. He had the same look as

when he was glaring at Vrehan, or the women who had tried to approach him before. Something about that place disgusted him. Why would he hate his childhood bedroom? It looked like it used to be a warm and nice bedroom for a child to be in. She looked at the damaged door again. Something had happened here. As if someone had gone berserk on it.

She turned around and left the room, but she had kept the little dragon toy with her. For some reason, she liked that stuffed toy. It only needed a bit of cleaning and sewing. As soon as she was next to him, Kairen put an arm around her waist and held her close. He was still glaring at the abandoned room.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He gently kissed her forehead, and Cassandra nodded. Somehow, she felt like she shouldn’t ask about that room now. He obviously didn’t want to talk about it, and she didn’t want to push him to.

They walked back together, the Prince guiding her silently to Missandra’s room. Her sister was still asleep when they got there, and Cassandra, worried, checked her temperature. She frowned, her hand on her sister’s forehead.

“She has a bit of a fever. I hoped she wouldn’t...”

Despite her worry, Kareen had already ordered some fever medicine to be prepared, just in case. Cassandra had nothing to say against it, so she gave it to her sister, once she was sure it had been tested, and let Missandra rest again.

“Son, your dragon is making a fuss in my garden,” said Kareen.

The Prince went out to go and handle an impatient Krai. The dragon had been waiting in the garden all afternoon for Cassandra, and was getting impatient and grumpy. The young concubine sighed.

“I’m so thankful to you, Lady Kareen. If it wasn’t for your help...”

“Don’t say such things. Of course. When an old woman like me can help, she will. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to protect my children.”

Cassandra blushed a bit, honored to hear the Imperial Concubine speak about her like so. She already knew Kareen was fond of her, regardless of Kairen’s relationship with her, but this was the first time she referred to her like she was her own daughter. For

an orphan like Cassandra, this was probably the nicest thing Kareen could have told her.

“Lady Kareen, earlier... I got a bit lost and ended up in an... abandoned ell,” she whispered, hoping Kareen would understand.

“I know,” sighed the Imperial Concubine. “My son has had that upset expression since earlier, and... that toy... Did he say anything?”

Cassandra looked down at the dragon plushie, and shook her head.

“No... I didn’t ask either.”

Kareen nodded sadly.

“It’s good that you didn’t, Cassandra. Men are men, they do not like to show their weakness and they do not share their secrets easily. Even the War God... Give him time. He will talk when he is ready.”

Cassandra understood. She wasn’t curious enough to pry into someone’s past. She felt that whatever it was about, it was something Kairen wouldn’t share easily, either. Something dark and painful happened to the War God.

The two women discussed Missandra’s health a bit longer, but when it became clear that the young woman wouldn’t wake up for a while after taking the fever medicine, Cassandra finally agreed to leave her for a bit.

In the garden, the sun was setting, and Kareen’s servants had prepared a little space for them to have a cozy dinner outside. The black dragon almost jumped on Cassandra upon seeing her, dangerously wagging its tail around and growling happily. Thankfully, the garden was large enough for the dragon to move around, or else it would have been a disaster.

To her surprise, the dragon seemed curious about the toy, too. Krai kept sniffing it, and Cassandra wondered if he could remember it somehow. She turned to Dahlia.

“Could you get me a washing basin? And a sewing kit, too...”

“I can do it for you, Lady Cassandra!”

“No, thank you, Dahlia, I would like to do it myself.”

“I understand. I will go get it then!”

Cassandra thanked her and went to sit next to Kareen on the large rug on the grass. There was a whole buffet waiting for them, their own little Celebration. Kairen and his sister joined them right after, too. The War God sat behind Cassandra, wrapping her in his arms, while Shareen laid down.

“So, what’s the plan?” asked Shareen, grabbing a cheese cube.

“There is no plan for now,” replied her mother. “We will treat Missandra, and as soon as the Celebrations are over, we are flying back to my Palace. I want to see Srai, too.”

Cassandra had almost forgotten about the little dragon. He probably missed his mom. Their baby’s egg was still in the Diamond Palace, too. Kareen had it safely guarded back there, and Cassandra trusted her fully with it. Cassandra wondered what color the baby dragon would be?

“Oh, I’m bored!” sighed Shareen. “Brother, come and spar with me! Like old times!”

Kairen frowned, but eventually got up. He and his sister drew out their swords and started dueling together. Cassandra wasn’t very worried. Those two were on the same level, and wouldn’t get too serious in front of their mother.

Meanwhile, Krai saw an opportunity and swiftly trotted to take Kairen’s spot behind Cassandra. Its large and long body actually allowed it to be circled around Kareen, too, making the dragon all the happier. It rested its head on Cassandra’s lap, while the Imperial Concubine laid her back against its body, used to this behavior.

The two women watched the siblings spar for a while. Dahlia had brought what she had asked for, so Cassandra slowly started working on improving the little dragon plushie’s condition while watching the duel. Cassandra was truly impressed at Shareen’s strength. Not only was the Princess extraordinarily strong, but she also didn’t have any issue fighting on equal terms with her brother, the War God. She was using two swords, and a perfectly balanced style, so elegant it almost seemed like a dance.

“Those two,” sighed Kareen. “I should have bought them dolls when they were kids!”

Cassandra chuckled, remembering the many toy swords she had seen. They may have not all belonged to Kairen, after all. Shareen was a bit of a tomboy, it seems.

“What kind of children were they?” Cassandra asked, still focused on her sewing.

“Exactly like now,” sighed the Imperial Concubine. “Kairen was silent and grumpy, Shareen was loud and grumpy. Those two little brats had such tempers... I only seldom brought them here. It was such a ruckus every time we came. Not only did they always spar between themselves like this, but they caused fights absolutely everywhere. Krai, too.”

“With their siblings?” asked Cassandra, glancing at the dragon who was sleeping, or pretending to.

“With their siblings, with their father’s concubines. Shareen once broke all of one of her sister’s fingers because she had insulted me. Most Concubines can’t scold Imperial Children unless they are their own, but with those two? Ah! I never had to raise my voice once, they’d always take care of any problem before I did!”

Cassandra had never imagined those two were once so protective of their mother. She could still remember how they weren’t thrilled about visiting her when she got hold of Krai’s Egg. Kareen probably didn’t let herself be bullied, either. They definitely inherited a lot of their mother’s traits, especially Shareen.

“Lady Kareen, pardon me for asking this, but... Why didn’t you marry the Emperor? You’ve been his favorite since...long ago.”

Kareen sighed, sliding her finger on her wine cup.

“That old man... He did propose a few times. However, every time we got close to an engagement, something happened. I almost died or lost one of my children. Jealousy won over everything, I suppose. He already had too many women before me, and I realized that marrying him meant my children would be in more danger than ever. I couldn’t forgive that. Especially the idea that I would have to live in the same place as my children’s assassins. We didn’t find who had done it. So, I decided to isolate myself, and focus on raising those two. That’s when he gifted me the Diamond City and Palace. It was an apology for being useless in finding our children’s murderer... I was devastated then, and became paranoid over protecting those two. I left the Palace. Since I ignored him, he got other concubines, other children... Time passed.”

“I thought... The Diamond Palace was a present for Kairen’s birth?”

“That’s what I told them. Trust me, a mother will find many lies to hide from her children, exactly how ugly the price for their survival was.”

Cassandra felt a bit sorry for Kareen. She had met the Emperor too late, and gotten involved in the cruel games of the Imperial Palace. She put a protective hand on her

tummy. Maybe, in other circumstances, she would have made the same choices as her. Now that she was expecting, her instincts were all about this baby's protection. Her refusal to marry Kairen for the time being had to do with that too... Though she was only willing to wait. She still held on to that idea of becoming his one and only woman, when they would be in a safer place.

"Talk about the dragon, and he will show his tail," said Kareen.

Cassandra lifted her head, and so did Krai, who growled immediately. To their surprise, Glahad was flying high above them, making circles in the sky and seeming hesitant to come down. Its golden scales were almost blinding with the sun's reflection in it. The Imperial Concubine clicked her tongue.

"Looks like he didn't appreciate me not coming to his damn Celebrations. Well, suits him. He can send his dragon, I don't care."

Cassandra kept staring at Glahad. Did the Emperor send his dragon to spy on them? She couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for it. The golden dragon probably didn't dare approach, and was only sent to check on their beloved. Krai kept growling in warning, though the black dragon would probably have lost a fight against Glahad.

"Hey!"

Meanwhile, on the grass Shareen had just gotten an injury. Probably unfocused because of Glahad, the sister had just received a large cut on her arm. She frowned, staring at it. To Cassandra's surprise, scales immediately appeared on her dark skin to cover it up, just like Kairen's injuries. Shareen's scales were more of dark indigo than black, though.

"She can do that too?" said Cassandra, surprised.

"Of course! My daughter has dragon blood too, after all!"

Shareen, who had heard them, rolled her eyes.

"Really, Cassie, you underestimate me that much?"

With a little laugh, she suddenly seemed like she was inhaling a lot of air, and, turning towards the area Glahad was flying in, Shareen suddenly exhaled a fireball!

Cassandra jumped in surprise, while the large golden dragon, though it hadn't been hit, growled, annoyed. Shareen's flames had died in the air, way before they reached

Glahad, who was flying too high. Yet, it was so impressive! The young concubine was both impressed and frightened.

“I had no idea the Princesses could do such a thing!”

“Not all the Princesses, Sweetie,” replied Shareen with an arrogant look. “It takes talent.”

“What talent?” retorted her mother. “It’s just like how your brother is so good at taming his dragon. It has nothing to do with talent.”

“Do you mean it’s also about their characters?” asked Cassandra.

She had slowly started to understand the bond between a Prince and his Dragon. The more true they were to themselves, the more their own dragons were tamed. Compared to Kairen, who never hid his emotions and acted as he wished, someone like Vrehan was unable to tame his dragon. His cunning nature and how he always hid his real thoughts were what kept his dragon wild. Had the Red Dragon been able to roam freely, it would have probably gone straight to kill its enemies in a rage.

Krai, however, was free to act. The dragon could kill, growl, and attack who Kairen hated, except for the Imperial Family. It was free to express its love for Cassandra, too, making it easier to tame than any of its peers. Cassandra wondered if the red dragon had no one to show love to.

“Shareen is more gifted than any of her sisters. Only a handful of Princesses can do the dragon’s breath, or have the dragon skin.”

“I thought it was mostly about blood?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” said Kareen. “The Princes are born separately from their dragons. The Emperor’s daughters, however, are half-dragons themselves. There is a theory that they are too weak for an actual dragon to be born, so instead.”

“It... grows in them?”

Cassandra was astonished. Didn’t that mean the Princesses’ potential was almost unlimited? They may not have dragons, but judging from Shareen’s skills, they may not even need to have one! Moreover, her injury was healing even faster than Kairen’s. What else was the Princess able to do?

“Doesn’t that mean Phetra will be healed soon?” she asked, suddenly remembering about the other matter.

“That... I’m waiting to see,” said Kareen with an enigmatic smile.

Cassandra wondered what Kareen had in mind about Phetra. Somehow, she felt like something bigger was at stake.

The siblings resumed their sparring, but Shareen and Kairen were obviously of equal strength. It could take a while, and even Glahad eventually left the skies above them, flying away. Cassandra sighed and caressed Krai’s warm scales. The dragon had gone back to its nap as soon as the older dragon was gone.

As they kept dining, some Imperial Servants came twice to invite Kareen and the siblings to the Celebrations, but the Imperial Concubine stubbornly ignored them. When another servant showed up, she frowned.

“Didn’t I say no twice already! How many times do I need to get mad for that old dragon to give up!”

“My apologies, Imperial Concubine,” said the poor servant. “I am only here to deliver a letter to the Third Prince’s Concubine.”

Cassandra got up to receive the letter, surprised. It came from the outside, and she suddenly understood. It was the intel Missandra had tried to gather about the abortion potion! She quickly sent the servant away, and opened it to read it quickly. A friend of Missandra from the Red District had apparently asked around, and it turned out, the order was made from the Imperial Palace indeed.

“It says someone from the Red Wind Pavilion made the order,” read Cassandra, confused.

Kareen sneered.

“That’s Vrehan’s dead mother’s pavilion. With this, the person who ordered the potion is obvious. It was probably Phetra. She is the one in charge of that place.”

“Phetra? Why would Princess Phetra order an abortion potion? If it wasn’t to be used against me then who?”

“Maybe that bitch was dumb enough to get pregnant,” muttered Shareen.

The siblings walked back to join the dinner, ending their duel after over an hour.

“I don’t think that bitch Princess was pregnant...”

They all turned around, surprised to see Missandra. The young woman was standing, looking a bit tired. Cassandra jumped on her feet, almost falling over Krai’s large head.

“Missandra! Why aren’t you in bed?! I thought you would be sleeping.”

“Their fever medicine is crappy. I needed some fresh air, too.”

With Dahlia and Cassandra’s help, Missandra sat next to them, grimacing with each movement she had to make using her back. Cassandra helped her drink some fresh water, but surprisingly, she seemed fine.

“Ah... The fresh air feels so good.”

“Eat, child, you need to regain your strength,” said Kareen, putting one of the plates before Missandra. “How would you know if Phetra is pregnant or not?”

“I’m good at that. Back when I was in the Red District, I could tell who got pregnant after only a couple of weeks. All the girls came to me to get my abortion medicine, too, so I got used to finding out who was pregnant. That Princess is definitely not pregnant.”

Kareen nodded, though she still looked doubtful.

Kairen and Shareen walked back to their side, too. Kairen, for once, let his dragon keep its spot behind Cassandra, probably so as to not scare Missandra. She was already looking uneasy with the dragon’s head only a few steps away from her. Shareen, next to their mother, grabbed some wine and shook her head.

“I don’t like that. I wish we knew who that damn potion was for.”

“Can it be one of the other concubines?”

“Aside from you, I don’t see who it could be. That idiot Lephys has pregnant concubines that we know of, but he’s too dumb for our father to ever consider him as an heir. No, my guts telling me it has to be for one of the Princesses.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen anyone wearing purple that was pregnant the other night,” said Missandra. “But I’m not a hundred percent accurate.”

“Not all the Princesses were there anyway,” said Kareen. “A lot of them try to be forgotten so that no one will ask the Emperor to marry them. They’d rather remain single than be forced to leave the Palace.”

“Will Phetra have to leave if she gets married?” asked Cassandra.

“That’s the whole point. Once we get married, Imperial Princesses like me lose most of our status. We can still wear the Imperial Purple, but aside from throwing tantrums and making the idiot husband kneel, it’s not that great. Father doesn’t care much about anything outside of the Palace. It’s less trouble for him if he has less whiny children to handle. Hence, most of the time, our sisters make sure to live their lives quietly. Or they work hard to help their brother get the throne.”

Cassandra suddenly understood why Shareen, despite being over thirty years old, was still single and living in the Palace. If she had been married off, it would have been one less ally for Kairen in the race to the Golden Throne. Indirectly, not marrying off Shareen was a way to show the Emperor’s favoritism once again. Without Kairen born a few years after her, Shareen would probably have led a very different life.

Once again, Cassandra thought the Princesses were very unlucky. Their destiny was closely tied to having a brother or not, and that brother’s actions.

“How many sisters does Vrehan have?” suddenly asked Cassandra, curious.

“Only three from the same mother. The oldest is already married. Phetra is the second sister, and they have a younger one.”

“Oh, what was her name again?” asks Shareen, frowning. “We rarely see that child, I almost forgot about her.”

“Phemera,” replied Kareen. “She must be around Missandra’s age now. She rarely goes out though, I think Phetra and Vrehan keep her from attending any banquets.”

Cassandra frowned. It seemed strange that they would hide their younger sister. Perhaps it’s to protect her? Or to keep her from spilling their secrets?

“Could she be the pregnant one?”

Both Shareen and Kareen stared at her, confused.

“Phemera rarely goes out,” repeated Kareen. “That child is so fragile, I heard she has to stay in bed all day. She probably never even gets a chance to see any man!”

Cassandra nodded. So, who then? Another concubine whose pregnancy could have been a threat to Vrehan?

“I wish Phetra was the one pregnant,” sneered Shareen. “That would make an excuse for Father to repudiate that vermin.”

“He already said he will marry her off! What more do you expect? Also, don’t wish for a pregnant woman to be in that state. Even if she’s a snake, her child would have nothing to do with it. Watch your words, Shareen. No, actually, eat and shut it!”

After that, the Princess sulked, and it appeared the topic was over. In the end, they still had no idea who the abortion potion could have been destined for. Without any definite answer, the conversation would only keep going in circles. At least, they were sure of who had ordered it, but the culprit was now locked up in the Imperial Prison with several fractures and no reason to answer them.

Cassandra felt like they were missing something, though. It was odd that Phetra would go out of her way to get that abortion potion. She hated not knowing who the victim should have been. It felt like another threat was hanging above her head with that unsolved question.

Thankfully, Cassandra could soon forget about that matter. As they were having a quiet dinner, Kareen had fun entertaining them with many rumors about the other concubines from back when she was in the Palace and the many stories she had witnessed. Between the feuds amongst the concubines and her own adventures, she had enough stories to write a full book! To Cassandra’s surprise, she and Missandra had a lot of fun exchanging about their favorite tricks to piss off their rival concubines or prostitutes. The Imperial Concubine wasn’t afraid to talk about some very crude topics, and Cassandra was the one, several times, to blush and try to change the topic a bit, much to Shareen’s amusement.

Somehow, it also became obvious that Missandra had taken in the lesson about her attitude with the Imperial Family. Even if it was only the five of them, plus Dahlia chuckling on the side, Missandra was very careful with her words, and absolutely avoided showing any disrespect for the Imperial Family. Cassandra thought it was a topic they would have to discuss sooner or later, but at least, it seemed her younger sister had finally understood that her words, if said at the wrong time and place, could have her killed.

It appeared that the Dragon Empire’s fever medicine wasn’t so bad, only late to take effect. Missandra started dozing off at the end of their dinner and had to be taken back

to her bed, half-asleep, to finally finish her night properly. Cassandra stayed a while looking at her younger sister's tired face, unsure.

Somehow, she wondered if Phetra was like her, trying to protect her younger sister from all of the Palace's schemes.

Sturdy arms appeared from behind to embrace her gently.

"You should go to sleep, too."

"If we skip the Celebrations, we might as well rest early," she nodded.

Kairen gently guided her to their room. For that night, another bedroom had been prepared for them to sleep inside Kareen's apartments. Somehow, Cassandra didn't feel safe going back to their bedroom after what had happened in her garden.

As she laid alongside her Prince, tired, it still took her a long while to fall asleep. Her thoughts kept going in circles over all of the events of that day; the unsolved questions she still had, and the threat of Phetra and Vrehan's vengeance. Somehow, she felt like Phetra's punishment had triggered something much more worrisome.

Cassandra finally fell asleep as the fireworks started outside. The thumps of her Prince's heart against her back echoed with the Celebrations, finally soothing her to sleep.