

Chapter 15

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

Cassandra frowned, waking up from all the ruckus. Next to her, Kairen was just sitting up too, with an annoyed expression. What was going on for them to be woken up so early? She could hear several servants outside, desperate to get their attention.

She had a bad feeling about this. What could it be? They wouldn't have dared to wake up the Prince in the middle of the night if it wasn't urgent. Kairen left the bed, grabbing his sword as a reflex, and Cassandra took her night robe to cover herself up too, following him to the door.

As they opened it, a handful of Imperial Servants bowed.

“Our apologies for waking the Third Prince and his Lady Concubine at such an hour! His Highness the Emperor is requesting your presence immediately!”

“Cassandra too?”

The servants exchanged glances, apparently unsure of what to answer.

“Uh... His Highness the Emperor only asked for you and Her Highness Princess Shareen to come at once, Your Highness.”

Shareen too? Kairen frowned and turned to her, as Cassandra was starting to really worry. What could have happened for them both to be called by the Emperor? Did it have to do with Vrehan, or Phetra? Had something big happened during the night?

Kairen clicked his tongue and turned to Cassandra.

“Go back to sleep,” he said. “I will be back soon.”

“No, it's alright, I want to come with you.”

The Prince frowned, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“You need more sleep...”

“I won’t be getting any if I don’t know what’s going on. Instead of staying here and worrying, I would rather come along. Please.”

The War God frowned, but indeed, it would be unlikely that his concubine would peacefully go back to sleep after she had heard that. She was awake and looking very concerned already. Cassandra rarely fell back to sleep once she was up. He nodded.

“Fine.”

They both followed the Imperial Servants out. They had no more information about what was going on. Shareen met them right outside of her bedroom, in her nightgown as well, looking grumpy with her black hair all over the place.

“I can’t believe they dare to wake us up in the middle of the night,” she groaned.

Indeed, it was still a couple of hours before dawn, too early for anything else but an emergency of some sort. The siblings didn’t exchange another word and followed the Imperial Servants out.

It was a long walk to the Emperor’s chambers, but Cassandra was impressed by how busy the Palace already was. Everywhere they walked, Imperial Servants were busy working, silently cleaning rooms and preparing for the day. Everything had to look perfect before the members of the Imperial Family got up.

Once they finally arrived, the Imperial Chamber was still in the dark, only lit by many candlelights. A few people were present. The Emperor, in a gold robe, with dark circles under his eyes, was walking in circles in front of his dragon. The man looked older than usual without his usual fancy outfits and jewelry. By his side, two older men in military suits were standing, along with a man in a minister’s official blue outfit, and some Imperial Servants.

“Ah, Kairen, Shareen! Finally!” exclaimed the Emperor upon seeing the trio.

“What is it, Father?” asked Kairen, while his sister yawned loudly next to him.

“Son, news just came from the border. We are under attack! I can’t believe those damn Republicans have the guts to throw an attack during the Celebrations”

“The Eastern Republic?” said Shareen. “I thought Brother defeated them already! Where did they find the courage to launch a new attack?!”

“I don’t know, I don’t care!” sighed the Emperor. “But they are making a ruckus at our border, and I don’t like that. We just got the news, they attacked last night. Anyway, while the Northern Barbarian Tribes are contained, Kairen...”

“I shall defend the border,” said the War God.

“Yes, yes. I really don’t like this! Losing time over this! So annoying, so annoying!”

Cassandra’s heart tightened. The Eastern Republic’s attack made no sense now! That country was much weaker than the Dragon Empire. However, no one in the room seemed to doubt that this attack could be pushed back without trouble. The Emperor was more worried about his Celebrations being ruined, and for a while, that was all he vented about, while the siblings waited, arms crossed until one of the Generals reminded him about the more pressing topic.

“Oh, whatever! Kairen, you can go and lead the army to crush them! Crush them for good, I’m fed up with those idiots! If it wasn’t so much workload I would just conquer them and that would be the end of the story! tsk!”

“Father, what about the Northern Tribes?” asked Shareen. “Even if the barbarians are quiet at the moment, Brother can’t just pull out his army like that.”

“You can go and replace him, for now. Kairen, you can take the Imperial Army with you, and let Shareen handle the north. One or two Imperial factions should be enough anyway, just go with Krai and handle this quickly!”

Cassandra was speechless about how this matter was handled. The War God only had to take a dragon, a portion of the Imperial Army and that was it? She had known about the strength of the Dragon Empire before, but now, they were talking about the fate of another country as if it was just a small matter to be handled overnight!

“Let Shareen go to the East,” suddenly said Kairen.

His sister frowned, turning to him.

“Kairen, I’m not the War Goddess,” she said. “What are you...”

Then, Shareen’s eyes fell on Cassandra, and she understood. He didn’t want to take his concubine to another battlefield. Shareen rolled her eyes and slapped his arm.

“Are you an idiot? We will just leave her with Mother! She was supposed to go back to the Diamond Palace with Mother soon anyway. You can just take Cassie back when you’re done with that stupid battle.”

“What? Who is going to the Diamond Palace?” suddenly asked the Emperor.

“Mother wants to go back,” said Shareen, her hands on her hips.

The Emperor turned white.

“Why! The Celebrations are not even over yet! Why can’t that damn woman stay here for more than a few days? She is so mean to me! She never lets me see her, she even ignores the Celebrations! How much more heartless can your mother be?!”

While the Emperor kept rambling and complaining about Imperial Concubine Kareen, Shareen sighed and turned to her brother and Cassandra.

“Seriously, Kairen, don’t be an idiot. Cassie will be just fine with mother, and it’s only for a few weeks anyway.”

“A few weeks?” repeated Cassandra.

From what she had heard until now, it looked like the matter of the Eastern Republic attack would be solved rather quickly, but to think it would last a few weeks? She felt really unsure about being separated from her Prince for so long, a second time. It would be just like the first time, when he was locked up here in the Imperial Palace while she stayed back with Kareen. Shareen sighed.

“It’s still about moving an army and pushing the enemy out of our territory, sweetie. The trip itself will take a few days to the East, and even if Brother has his dragon, the Army will need to get there the old way.”

Kairen was still frowning. The Third Prince didn’t like this situation either. Cassandra was upset, though she did her best not to let it show too much. This was so sudden. She didn’t think they would have to separate so quickly!

The two of them exchanged a long glance. Cassandra’s heart was breaking, but she was well aware that this was his duty as a Prince. Eventually, she gathered her courage and nodded, gently taking his hand. Kairen put his arm around her and kissed her head before turning to the Emperor.

“Father, give me the command of the Imperial Army. I will leave at dawn.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” said the Emperor, interrupted in his rant. “Can someone here write this down? Oh, you there, perfect. As of today, yada yada yada, I hereby confer the power to lead the Imperial Army to my son, the Third Prince Kairen, War God of The Dragon Empire, and dala, dala... Just leave it, I’ll fill in the blanks later for the paperwork. Copy this, I’ll make the official announcement later. Alright, Son, it’s done.”

Kairen nodded and turned to Cassandra.

“I’ll take you and my mother back to the Diamond Palace before I leave,” he whispered.

“I understand.”

“Father, are we done here?” asked Shareen, impatient.

The Emperor exchanged looks with the two generals, nodding.

“Yes, Daughter of mine, but your mother...”

“Bye, Father!”

Before he could add anything, Kairen and Shareen promptly left, pulling Cassandra with them. She could still hear the Emperor’s frustrated yells several corridors away. She sighed.

“I feel a bit sorry for His Highness,” she whispered.

“Don’t be,” retorted Shareen. “Mother is doing this on purpose, anyway. I’m fairly sure her two favorite hobbies are pissing our Father off and ignoring him.”

“How are you going to go to the North, Shareen?” asked Cassandra. “Without a dragon...”

“Brother and Krai will drop me off half-way. I can ride a horse from there. The northern border isn’t a problem for now anyway.”

For a moment, Cassandra wondered if she shouldn’t go to the Onyx Castle. However, she had already entered the second trimester of her pregnancy. In any case, she knew she would be safer by Kareen’s side, in the Diamond Palace. Moreover, she would be too lonely, waiting in the Onyx Castle without the Prince there.

The siblings and Cassandra walked back to the Imperial Concubine's apartments. Kareen had been woken up by the earlier ruckus and was already waiting for them in her garden. Shareen quickly explained the situation, making the Imperial Concubine frown more and more as she went on.

"And that old man is sending you two? What about me! Doesn't that old man have other children to send to the front? Am I his only woman producing warriors!"

"Mother, stop it. You know Kairen and I are the best fighters. Sephir will just get killed, and Father doesn't want to give Vrehan an opportunity to earn merit. Just let us go without a fuss, you know we love it anyway."

"A fuss? How are you talking to your mother!"

"I will take you and Cassandra back to the Diamond Palace," said Kairen.

The Imperial Concubine was still sulking and turned her anger to him.

"Of course, you agreed to it too! What next? How long will I wait to see my children next time? And Cassandra? You better be back before your son is born, Kairen!"

Her son obediently nodded, putting his arms around Cassandra in a possessive stance. She chuckled, trying to be brave.

"It will be fine, Lady Kareen. I didn't want to stay here any longer, anyway. So this is a good opportunity to leave without angering his Highness."

"Speak for yourself," says Shareen. "He was furious about Mother leaving."

"Why would I stay here if my children are elsewhere?!" shouted the Imperial Concubine. "How dare that old man complain! Let's just have breakfast and leave!"

Cassandra sighed, watching the Imperial Concubine angrily walk away, yelling for the breakfast to be served already.

"Will you be alright?" he whispered.

"Yes. I'm more worried about Missandra. I hope she can handle the journey."

"She will be fine," Shareen replied. "Your sister is probably stronger than she looks, she was already fine last night."

Cassandra nodded. She was a bit dizzy from all the events in the last hour. They had plans to leave as soon as the Celebrations were over anyway, but she didn't think it would all happen in such a rush. Moreover, it meant she would have to say goodbye to Kairen, again and soon.

Shareen sighed and went to go and calm down their mother, who was already storming left and right, making preparations for their departure. Cassandra watched them argue and go back to another room, fighting over the ruckus.

Left alone with Kairen in the garden, she turned around, still wrapped in his arms, to face him.

"When will you leave for real?" she asked.

"I will drop you and mother at the Diamond Palace, and stay until the Imperial Army catches up. Maybe a few days. A week at most."

A week... They had a week left together. Cassandra nodded, but her throat was tight, and her heart was so heavy, she almost felt like crying.

"You won't be in danger, will you?" she asked.

"No."

She chuckled. He was so sure... Of course. The invincible War God of the Dragon Empire. Cassandra hugged him, feeling a bit vulnerable at that moment.

"Kairen... If it rains during this next week... Let's have our Ceremony. Please."

"We will."

Under Kareen's impulse, their departure was put in motion quite promptly. None of them had much to take back to the Diamond Palace anyway, so they took their time, decided to have breakfast and let the servants prepare whatever they needed to pack.

Once again, they had breakfast in the Imperial Concubine's Garden, much to Krai's pleasure, as it could lay next to Cassandra and nap in the rising sunlight. As everyone had been woken up quite abruptly, they somehow agreed to take their time whilst having breakfast. They even waited for Missandra to wake up, and Anour showed up before their departure, too.

As promised, they were ready to depart soon after dawn. To Cassandra's surprise, the First Prince's concubines, who had heard of the news, showed up to bid her goodbye

before she left. Cassandra gave them a couple more recommendations about Prince Sephir's health and politely said goodbye.

Krai seemed ready for this flight, stretching its wings and walking around in the garden, a bit impatient. To everyone's surprise, Roun, Anour's Green Dragon, actually showed up too.

"I'll accompany you," said the young Prince. "This way, I can take Shareen straight to the Northern border and save you some time! I want to go help her at the border, too, the Imperial Palace is so boring!"

"Fine," said Kareen, with a pout. "Aren't you two just in a hurry to leave me to go play with swords!"

After that, she got on Krai's back, as if it was her dragon. Cassandra wondered what a young Kareen handling baby Krai would have been like. The Black Dragon always seemed happy to see the Imperial Concubine, growling softly at her the same way it did to Cassandra. She secretly wished her own son's dragon would have a similar attitude with her, even when she would be old.

Missandra and Dahlia both agreed to climb on Roun's back, behind Anour, as the green dragon was smaller and less scary to them than Krai. Shareen climbed on Krai's back after her mother, and both her and Kairen helped Cassandra up.

Just like that, the little group took off without much of a ceremony.

It had been a little while since her last flight, and Cassandra took a deep breath, hoping she wouldn't get nauseous again. Slowly, the Imperial Palace got smaller under them, and she realized once again how big it actually was. She thought about her medicinal garden, and wished she could have brought it back with them. It was a pity she had only been able to use it a couple of times.

As it was still quite early, the sky was colder than usual. Cassandra was wrapped up in one of the fur coats, and was held on to tightly by her Prince, as usual, while Krai was peacefully flying to the Diamond Palace. The dragon knew the way all too well, it was an easy ride. Actually, it even bickered a bit with its younger brother, Roun, fooling around, growling at each other and trying to bite each other's tail playfully. They kept changing spots, one above and one under until Kairen and Anour had them stop before the women on both sides got sick.

To Cassandra's surprise, Roun was slimmer and smaller, but considerably faster than the black dragon. Its personality, for what she had seen so far, seemed to match that of Anour, too, being more cunning and curious than Krai.

The two of them kept playing more quietly for the rest of the ride, but as they arrived above the Diamond City, Krai got more interested in the Diamond Palace. The dragon accelerated a bit, in a hurry to land there. Both dragons knew the place well and didn't need to be told where to go. Another dragon's growls welcomed them as they landed in one of the larger gardens.

"Hello, my darling," said Kareen, getting off first.

Srai, the little dragon, was excited to see her, jumping all around the place and growling loudly. It even bumped into Krai a couple of times without caring. While Kareen caressed it, calming the young dragon a bit, Shareen jumped off Krai's back, and Kairen helped Cassandra down.

On another end of the garden, Anour was helping Dahlia and Missandra down. The two girls were a bit green and white, but they took deep breaths once they were on the grass, relieved.

"I'm never, ever getting on one of those creatures again..." muttered Missandra, still shaking a bit, walking back to Cassandra with a frown.

Dahlia was quiet, but her expression was not good either. Cassandra felt a bit sorry for them. She had ridden on Krai's back over a dozen times, and was still feeling a bit sick at times. Moreover, the dragons had made the girls' first trip a bit rowdy.

Behind them, Krai was a bit impatient. It kept growling and tottling in circles, getting grumpy. The Imperial Concubine sighed.

"Oh, enough, enough... Let's go."

Cassandra, too, was sharing Krai's excitement, just a bit more quietly. They followed the Imperial Concubine into several corridors. Unlike the Imperial Palace, the Diamond Palace was more dragon-friendly, and full of roof-less rooms. Hence, even if the adult-sized dragons couldn't follow in one room, they would find a way to reunite with the little group through another opening. Behind Cassandra, Missandra kept staring around, impressed, just like her sister the first time. Cassandra chuckled once she noticed this. Indeed, the Diamond Palace was much more to their taste, with all of its wild plants growing freely, wide-open spaces, sunny chambers, and the many water fountains and natural rivers crossing here and there.

“Here it is.”

For once in the Palace, Kareen had to open a lock for them to have access to another large indoor garden. It could be accessed through the open roof for the dragons, but for humans, it would have been impossible to climb, with such height and the slippery stonewall.

Hence, when she walked in, Cassandra found Krai already circled up around the egg, rubbing its snout against it.

Cassandra couldn't describe the warm feeling that filled her heart upon being reunited with the Dragon Egg. She walked up to it, putting her hands on its warm shell.

“Is that...?” asked Missandra.

“Our future nephew's dragon,” explained Shareen.

Quickly, she explained to the younger sister about dragon eggs and their birth, while Cassandra and Krai were happily re-discovering the egg. It had indisputably grown since last time. It was now about as tall as a young child! Once again, it reacted to Cassandra's presence, the shiny light inside glowing where she was putting her hands, or where Krai was sniffing.

“You're telling me the... The Black Dragon is a female?” whispered Missandra, confused.

“Dragons are agender, neither female nor male,” explained Kareen. “Dragons are a unique kind of creature, as they don't reproduce like humans or animals.”

“They just need to pee and poop.”

“Shareen!”

Behind them, Anour laughed, but was soon interrupted by some furious growls. Roun and Srai, curious, had shown up, the first above and the second from the door, and were brutally growled at by Krai.

The black dragon was fiercely defending its egg, warning the two other dragons from coming closer. Actually, Cassandra noticed that, aside from her prince, Kareen, and her, none of the other people present had walked further than the entrance of the garden. Though she could understand about Missandra and Dahlia standing away from the black dragon, as its size was taking up most of the space, she was surprised

that Anour and Shareen had also stayed back. She had thought it was because there wasn't much space, but seeing how even Roun and Srai couldn't approach the egg, Cassandra realized Krai would have probably chased them away too.

She gently patted the Black Dragon to calm it down, while the other two gave up and retreated a bit.

"This egg is getting bigger than expected," said Shareen.

"Is it a problem?" asked Cassandra, worried.

"Of course not. Your son will probably be stronger than the norm, but that's not so surprising given his lineage!"

Cassandra smiled. How she wished she could see her baby and his dragon soon! She wanted to guess it's size, it's color, but she truly had no idea. Would he be black like Krai? Or maybe another color? Roun and the other dragons were all of amazing colors as well.

Krai, too, was affectionately rubbing its snout against the egg, growling softly. Had the black dragon missed the egg as well? After a while of watching the dragon's affectionate behavior, Cassandra stood up and walked to Kairen, hugging her Prince. Sometimes, she forgot that Krai was an embodiment of his tamer's emotions.

The War God hugged her, keeping her in his arms, gently caressing her back.

With a gesture from the Imperial Concubine, everyone else but the couple and the black dragon cleared the room in a few seconds to give them some privacy. As they were now alone in the little garden. Cassandra smiled and, with a bit of boldness, stood on her toes to kiss him lovingly.

Of course, Kairen answered her kiss back. For a while, they were alone with his dragon, exchanging tender kisses and hugging. Truth was, Cassandra hadn't been able to relax like this in a while. Not since they had left the Diamond Palace, actually. Now that they were back in Lady Kareen's domain, the young concubine could finally breathe a little, and not be on guard at all times. Missandra was there too, so she didn't have to worry about her younger sister either.

Those feelings transferred into her bold kisses and the hands with which she gently caressed her War God, her man. Kairen was agreeably surprised. He had noticed Cassandra was uneasy during their stay at the Imperial Palace, but he had never thought coming back to the Diamond Palace would free her like that.

For a while, they kept exchanging kisses, hugging and caressing each other. However, they were unwilling to leave this room. As they both ran out of breath, Cassandra chuckled, resting her head on his shoulder, in a way that she could look at the egg and Krai wrapped around it.

“I hope it will rain soon,” she whispered. “I don’t want to part with you yet.”

“I will be back as soon as I can. You can stay here, and rest. Take care of yourself and the baby.”

She nodded, putting her arms around his neck. Cassandra wasn’t worried about staying behind at the Diamond Palace, but she hated the idea of parting with him. She had such fond memories of her time with him in the North, at the Military Camp.

However, things were different this time; she couldn’t follow him into this battle. Cassandra sighed and turned to Kairen.

“We have about a week, right?” she whispered.

“Until the Imperial Army reaches here, yes.”

“Let’s just stay together as much as we can... please?”

Cassandra’s begging voice, when she was pleading like that, was the most desirable thing in the world in the War God’s eyes. Kairen softly smiled, and without saying anything else, suddenly lifted her, taking her into a wild kiss, out of the room and to where they could really be alone.

Cassandra had no idea how her Prince had found a bedroom so easily, but at that moment, she didn’t care much. He was carrying her effortlessly, her legs around his waist, and their kisses were getting wilder and wilder.

She couldn’t stop. The taste of his tongue, his scratchy cheeks, his hot breath. She was melting under his touch. Kairen’s hands were as hot, large, and pleasant as ever. Cassandra could feel all the soft fabric ruffled by his fingers, how he played with her skirt, the silk going up and down on her thighs. His hand found its way to her hair, undoing her hairdo, the pieces of metal falling one after the other onto the floor. As the hairpins kept coming out, her long hair came down, letting the Prince play with it as much as he wanted. He would tangle her curls around his fingers, grasp it, hold it tight, and let go again. Cassandra was able to catch her breath when he moved on to kiss her exposed throat, sucking on her bare skin and giving her delicious chills. The touch of his lips drove her crazy anywhere they landed on. He was reckless, restless in

covering her with savage kisses. She could hear herself moan and breathe louder, unable to hold it.

His hand found its way under her skirt, caressing her butt, his fingers sliding under the thin fabric of her panties. Cassandra brushed his hair with her fingers, looking to lock her lips on his again. She wanted him so badly already. She could feel the bump beneath his pants, already rubbing against her, and it was terribly exciting. Her body was so responsive already, her inner parts shamelessly throbbing.

Cassandra struggled to get him out of his clothes while kissing him, only interrupting when they had to, but she wanted his skin. She wanted to touch him more, caress his bronze skin, and feel his warmth against hers. She was out of breath, but Kairen pulled the top of her dress down, and suddenly toppled her on the bed.

She chuckled, suddenly finding herself under him, so fast she hadn't seen it coming. Kairen sat back a second, and pulled her dress down to her ankles and out of the way, leaving her with one last little piece of clothing. Cassandra felt embarrassed, exposed like that on the bed, but the sight in front of her was not to be missed either. The muscular, hunky War God's body, shining with a thin layer of sweat as he took off his pants and braces in a few seconds. He was staring at her the whole time, ogling her with those burning, dark irises. Cassandra blushed, feeling her body react to the lust in his eyes. He was detailing every inch of her skin, like a beast looking at its prey with a torrid hunger. Her skin was so hot already, she couldn't take that burning stare. Cassandra bit her lip, and unable to hold back, her hand reached down between her legs. Staring right back at the War God, she caressed herself with her fingertips, but her panties and belly were both in the way.

Now fully naked, the War God was on his knees, sitting at the end of the bed, watching her struggle. His fingers gently caressed her ankles, but he wasn't coming any closer. Kairen was simply staring, a little sneer on his lips while Cassandra was getting frustrated. Her fingers barely had room to move around her little button of pleasure, and it wasn't anywhere near enough. Not when she was already this wet.

"Kairen..." she called him with a begging voice.

"Keep going."

That order pronounced with his deep, commanding voice made her whole body shiver. She accelerated her movements, locking her eyes with his, feeling his intense stare on her naked body. The War God was caressing her leg slowly, his hand gently going up from her ankle, yet nowhere near where she wanted. He was obviously teasing her. When Cassandra started feeling her first waves of pleasure coming, he

suddenly pulled her legs up, her ankles on his shoulders, in a horribly tempting position.

Her entrance was now so close to his virility. Yet still a few inches apart. Cassandra bit her lip, horribly frustrated.

“Please...”

“Keep going, Cassandra.”

His game was too cruel. Her position made it even harder to focus on what her fingers were doing, when his manhood was so close. His fingers, too, were stroking her legs gently, up and down, going a bit lower each time. Kairen turned his head, kissing her ankle, making her blush even more. How could a simple kiss on her ankle excite her so much? Cassandra wanted to beg, have this torture stop, but she was completely mesmerized by his hot obsidian eyes.

She breathed louder, her fingertips clumsily playing around her dripping entrance, trying to get there. She was so hot already, how could she reach it? Kairen’s eyes were driving her crazy. The beast was just there, enjoying the show and torturing her with that hot gaze. Cassandra was melting under his stare...in so many ways. She tried closing her eyes for a second, but it only made it worse. As if his gaze was even more intense on her skin. He suddenly moved on the bed, and as she re-opened her eyes with a surprise, she felt his lips going down her leg. Cassandra gasped. What kind of torture was this. He gently kissed her knee, went back up inside her thigh, and a bit higher...When his tongue found her entrance, she moaned loudly, arching her body. The sudden invasion of his hot breath, tongue, and lips was ruthless, and Cassandra couldn’t help but cry out, overwhelmed.

“Oh... uh... hun...Ah!”

She kept trying to hold it back, but it was impossible. Her fingers hooked in his hair, as she kept quivering. His tongue was not giving her any rest, diving and licking in her hottest part, eating her up, filling her with unpredictable attacks. His lips would suck on her little pink button until she was about to come, and stop at the last second to go down and dip his tongue again, driving her nuts. Kairen’s hands were firmly holding her hips, she couldn’t get away from his hot breath burning her insides. His head between her legs, he was wholly devoted to her pussy, making her tremble and moan. Cassandra kept writhing under this torture, torn between wanting more and not being able to stand it any longer. She wasn’t even trying to hold her voice back anymore.

“Kairen, please, please... Please...”

Cassandra’s words kept echoing along with her cries, higher and higher, the fire devouring her. Her Prince didn’t stop, licking, sucking, digging into her until she squealed, a raging pleasure bursting through her whole body.

For several long seconds, she quivered under him, unable to stop the sparks spreading under her skin. Her limbs filled and emptied with waves of pleasure, and the numbness that followed such an intense storm.

When her body finally calmed down, Cassandra was out of breath, trying to reconcile with reality.

Kairen chuckled, landing gentle, innocent kisses on her skin, caressing her hips and waiting for her to calm down. He moved over her, going up to where their lips could meet. He gently kissed her temple, while Cassandra was still panting.

“You’re so... mean,” she whispered with a cute pout.

The War God took the compliment silently, caressing her hair. Cassandra sighed and put her hands on his torso, her fingers stroking down the lines of his muscles. She loved his build so much. Every lump was perfectly defined, the silent strength under his skin oozing with his breath. He was truly a War God. No sculpture could have depicted such a perfect drawing more accurately.

Her hands slid down, reaching his inner regions as she kept caressing him. Kairen slightly tensed up, his breath on her neck, when she touched his rod. Cassandra hesitated a second and gently started caressing it, her hands slowly going up and down, watching his reactions. He was still a bit tense, but she could hear his breathing accelerate against her ear. He kissed her neck again, more sensually, and she knew she could keep going. Cassandra felt a bit shy, holding him in her hands, but she wanted to be the one to please him this time around. She gathered her courage, and kissed his shoulder, his neck, going a bit further down one kiss at a time. She gently pushed him, inverting their positions to get on top, and kept her exploration going. Her lips went down on his chest, his abs, his abdomen... but when she was about to reach her goal, Kairen stopped her.

“Kairen...?”

“Don’t.”

His voice was gentle but firm, and he was holding her arm, preventing her from going any further down despite her hands already there. She frowned, a bit surprised by his abrupt refusal.

“I don’t mind...”

“I said no.”

Somehow, she felt that little thing in his voice that made her understand. She nodded, and to show him it was alright, went back to his lips, calming him down a little. Their kiss got gradually wilder, more passionate, and the heat increased again between their bodies. Her hands kept their gentle stroking going, but soon, it wasn’t enough anymore. Cassandra moaned a bit, as their lips got restless, and positioned herself.

On top of him, she locked her eyes on his, and slowly went down. Cassandra didn’t hold her voice back as he slid inside her, pushing her walls and filling her. There was something so satisfying, just to feel him, hard and rocking her throbbing region. She closed her eyes, her hands on his chest, just trying to appreciate those sensations, and move slowly.

Kairen was mesmerized by the vision of the young concubine on him, indulging herself in pleasure. Her white skin would bloom with undertones of pink, and her long hair falling like a waterfall on her shoulders, balancing along with her movements. He held onto her waist, watching her take control and move her body as she wanted. Cassandra’s voice was a melody to his ears, getting deliciously sexy when she was indulging in pleasure, and surely she was. He could feel her clamp and grind around his rod, her lips trembling, her voice translating her pleasure into moans. She kept moving her hips, balancing her body in a gentle dance, holding onto him. At some point, Cassandra locked her emerald eyes onto him, breathing a bit louder. Kairen’s hands traveled up to her breasts, fondling them and making her react with shivers of pleasure. She felt it tingling, his hands making her even hotter if possible. She rushed her movements a bit, biting her lip. Was he going to let her do it all by herself?

Cassandra bent over, to kiss his lips, softly, playing a bit with her tongue and teasing him. Her fingers brushed his hairline, holding on to his nape. She moved her hips a bit more insistently.

“Kairen, move... Please...?”

The War God smiled, answering her smile and demand. Cassandra yelped when he suddenly started moving brutally under her. She hadn’t predicted he would get so excitable! She moaned loudly, the ride getting wilder, leaving her no rest. It was

nothing compared to her lascivious movements just a few seconds ago. Kairen was plunging wildly inside her, his hips giving her a hell of a ride. She had to hold on to both of his shoulders, completely overwhelmed by his assault, crying out and unable to focus anymore. The sounds of their love-making were echoing in the room, obscene and terribly lewd. Cassandra could both feel and hear their bodies slapping against each other, with the wetness she was guilty of. She couldn't control her indecent behavior anymore. She just kept moaning at each thrust, her voice getting hoarse. His rod was rubbing her insides, giving her exactly what she had been begging for.

“Ah! Yes... yes... Ah... Ah... more... yes...”

He was not going to stop, just for the sake of hearing her beg for it. Kairen kept thrusting, groaning, moving until she couldn't take it anymore. His savage desire was untamable. He couldn't hold back. He wanted her, all of her, deep and hard. Even when her voice broke from crying out so much, he wouldn't slow down. Not when she was swallowing him deep like that. Every time he pulled back, it made him want to dive back even faster. He got on top somehow, pinning Cassandra where she was completely submitted to his assaults. The beast was unleashed, she had to hold on to his wrist and shoulder to take it. When she started calling his name, with that worn-out voice, he lost it. The last movements were ruthless and had her crying out, her body spasming, bringing a brutal orgasm as he froze inside, unleashing in a husky groan.

The pleasure was out of this world. Cassandra felt fireworks explode in her head, feeling him fill her, her body quivering. Kairen stayed tensed up, deep inside for a long while, letting the last bits of his pleasure die in her, enjoying those seconds of eternity until it ran out. Their breathing slowly calmed down, both completely exhausted. All strength had left Cassandra's body. She sighed, and her Prince hugged her, holding her in his embrace.

Cassandra rolled to the side, slowly catching her breath. Her body was still slightly shivering from the aftermath of that wild sex. How many times has it been? She vaguely remembered them changing position three or four times, but her mind was still foggy. She sighed. She could feel that pearl of sweat on her nape, and her hair sticking to her temple.

Kairen gently took her in his embrace and pulled one of the familiar fur blankets over her. The young woman was only too happy to lay on his chest.

Somehow, despite her exhaustion, her body was still too excited for her to calm down enough and sleep yet. She kept her eyes open, her finger drawing circles on her

Prince's chest. For a long while, they stayed together like this. His hands were gently caressing her back, going up and down her spine. With the silence that had fallen in the room, they could hear the noises coming from the windows. Some exotic birds were chirping. Human voices too, though they were too far and numerous to be understood.

Unlike the Onyx Castle, which was completely isolated, the Diamond Palace was still in the heart of a vast city. There was always something going on inside. Cassandra liked this atmosphere. Just the two of them, cuddling in that bedroom, while the world kept itself busy outside.

After a while, she heard him sigh, and couldn't help but worry a bit.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"I don't like leaving you here," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Don't worry. I'll stay here with Lady Kareen. It will be fine. Just be careful, please."

Kairen took a deep breath, and kissed her forehead. It didn't feel like enough for Cassandra. She got up a bit, lying on his chest, to come and kiss him properly. The War God wrapped his arms around her, hugging her and answering her kiss. This time, it was a slow, tender kiss. He let Cassandra take the lead. Her thin lips on his were like a flower's petal, so smooth and light. She was getting just a little bit bolder every day, too. He could feel the tip of her tongue, teasing him, giving him a little taste of her and making him thirsty for more.

Cassandra smiled, and her lips went left, to kiss his cheek, where his beard was growing. The little spikes she liked to play with were slipping through her fingertips on the other side. Kairen smiled, satisfied, letting her gently cover his face with her shy kisses.

When she stopped, placing her chin on his torso, he brushed her hair with his fingers, a bit amused.

"What are you so amused about?" she whispered.

"You've changed. I remember the shy girl who would blush every time I touched her."

Cassandra blushed again hearing that, with a little pout.

“You were so... You would put your hand under my skirt and say such obscene things.”

“Did I?” he said, with a little sneer.

Cassandra softly slapped his chest.

“Yes, you! Putting your hand under my skirt and asking if I was a virgin, too. You just enjoyed teasing me so much.”

Kairen smiled, and while she wondered what he was thinking, she suddenly felt his hand sliding between her thighs, making her yelp in surprise. The War God gently caressed her opening, but she was still so wet and sensitive from their wild activity just before, Cassandra was already shivering.

“Was it like this? Or...”

Just as he played, his finger moved between her wet lips, making her moan again. Her legs tensed up, and Cassandra bit her lip, sending him an offended look.

Kairen chuckled, amused, and came to kiss her temple, though it was obvious his concubine was sulking a little bit. She moved slightly, and pushed his hand with a sullen look.

“So mean,” she whispered.

“Mh...”

He obviously had no remorse or intention to apologize for his past behavior. Cassandra sighed. She was so scared back then, the Prince suddenly taking an interest in her had been completely unexpected. Thinking about it, her feelings for him had evolved so quickly. She had been caught in a storm and happy to submit.

Kairen gently kissed her temple again, caressing her hair gently. She couldn't ignore him, she just enjoyed his touch so much. Cassandra smiled and wrapped her hands around his neck, locking him into some more kisses. It had been a while since they had been able to rest and snuggle together, without worrying about any event to attend or anyone to accompany.

“Kairen... Why didn't you take any other concubines? Before me?” she asked, feeling a bit curious.

He sighed, frowning a bit. He didn't like that question. They both knew he'd had concubines in the past, but none of those women had made it out alive. They weren't picked by him, either. Cassandra clearly remembered Nebora's words. All the concubines Kairen had been presented with were sent by his brothers or father. From their meeting, she had somehow assumed it was natural for him to take new concubines on a whim, as it was for any Prince. However, she had been proven very wrong as soon as she arrived at the Onyx Castle. Not only did Kairen not have any other concubines, but he also didn't show much interest in any woman besides her.

His glare and disgust towards the women that had tried to seduce him previously had made her realize, he absolutely loathed that kind of behavior. She truly was the only woman he ever showed any arousal or interest towards. He didn't care about any other woman, no matter how young or beautiful she was. As a healthy young man, it was a bit surprising.

"I hate those women," he whispered.

"The concubines?"

"You... Didn't ask about my bedroom. The one in the Imperial Palace."

"No... I figured you didn't want to talk about it... and I didn't want to pry."

The Prince sighed. For a while, Cassandra wondered if he was going to end the topic there. He put an arm over his face, covering his eyes. He didn't look sad, just...bothered. She felt a bit unsure, as she couldn't see his expression. Was it too sensitive to bring up? She hesitated a bit on what to add, biting her lip.

"Kairen?"

"That room... We lived there when I was younger. Shareen, Mother, and I. One night, when I was twelve or thirteen...I woke up, it was very late. I was feeling sick, strange. I didn't know what it was. Then I realized I wasn't alone. A servant woman was there."

"In your bedroom?"

"In my bed. She was on me... Sucking me. I stayed there. I couldn't move. I felt like a monster was trying to eat me. I got mad... Krai got mad, and we killed that woman. I'm not sure exactly what happened. You saw the room."

Cassandra was speechless. She clearly remembered that bedroom. It was as if a beast had gone berserk inside. It was Kairen and Krai's wrath that had been unleashed inside.

The young concubine felt her heart going crazy inside her chest. She was mad and terribly sad. She was sickened by what had happened to her Prince. He was so young! How could that woman do such a thing? For a minute, she had a hard time calming down and holding in her tears. Never had she seen such a vulnerable side of her Prince, or even imagined he had one.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, her voice almost breaking.

"Don't be. That woman is dead."

"But... why did she..."

"She was probably trying to become a concubine. Some women target the Imperial Family so they can improve their lives this way."

Cassandra felt utterly disgusted. How greedy could a human being be? To go ahead and rape a young boy! She had never been so shocked before. She had always felt like the Imperial Family was absolutely untouchable, always the ones inflicting the pain, the ones in control of other people's fate. Never in a million years would she have imagined they were the target of such monsters.

No wonder the Prince was so disgusted at those lecherous women, after what he had gone through. Then, two of the concubines he had been sent afterward had tried to kill him. How could he still believe in any woman after that? He was seen as prey by those monsters from such a young age. The War God had grown to be the man he was because he had learned to fight the worst kind of monsters from a young age.

"She was the first person I ever killed," he whispered. "Mother found out in the morning. She got rid of the body, and we moved back to the Diamond Palace again. She kept as few servants as possible, but I wasn't afraid. I would just murder anyone if I had a doubt. I kept killing, my father sent me to the front, where I could unleash as much as I wanted. It wasn't the same, but somehow, the sight of blood helped me more than anything else."

"So that's how you became the War God so young."

"I felt like I belonged on the battlefield more than anywhere else. I hated being here, or in the Imperial Palace. I slept better on the ground than in any bed."

Cassandra suddenly remembered how desolated and empty the Onyx Castle always seemed. Any of Kairen's bedrooms, she had always thought they didn't look like anyone lived there...and no one did. The Prince avoided those places, preferring his army tent. Everything made so much sense now.

"When I met you... You were the first woman that didn't care. You showed only fear. Any woman I had met, no matter how scared they were, there was always that...thing in their eyes. That slight hope that I might get interested in them, fuck them, and make them my concubine. That greed, the same greed I had seen in that woman's eyes. I'd rather kill them."

He took his arm out of the way, to come and gently caress her soft cheek.

"You were the only one. You didn't lust for me. You were just scared. When I tried to tease you, see if you'd show your true colors, your lust as a woman, you just turned out to be even more innocent than I had thought. When that woman hurt you..."

"Lyria? My former Master's concubine?"

"Yeah. I saw...the way she looked at me, and the way you looked at her. You were different. Somehow, I understood why Krai liked you. You were just...pure. So pure. You didn't have that greed that was in her eyes, not even the will to save yourself. You were just scared of me."

Cassandra sighed. It was all so... sad.

She hadn't thought much about their first encounter. The War God was so indecipherable back then. She would have never imagined he looked at her that way. That certainly explained a lot.

"Is that why you didn't let me... satisfy you?"

Kairen caressed her lips with his thumb, slightly nodding.

"I don't want to see you like that...I don't need that."

"I understand," she whispered.

They stayed silent for a few seconds, just staring in each other's eyes lovingly. Cassandra could tell, there wasn't anything the War God feared anymore in women. Instead, it had been replaced by this wrath, this bloodthirst. The way he had found to

cope had become his way of life. The blood that dirtied his sword, the way he had dirtied his hands to save himself.

She was falling a bit deeper for that man. How was he still able to love her so tenderly, after what he had gone through? Kairen had such a loving side... just for her. She smiled and gently kissed him again. The War God answered her kiss, caressing her hair, her cheek...

Cassandra deepened their kiss, taking the reins. She wanted him to feel her love for him. He wasn't that scared boy anymore. He had grown into a strong, powerful man, who could kill, but still love.

Despite a long and love-filled afternoon nap, they couldn't possibly stay hidden in that bedroom forever. Notably, because Cassandra found herself starving when she woke up and sighed. Her baby was truly eating like a young dragon. She stretched her sore and painful muscles a bit with a groan, sitting on the side of the bed. Kairen sat behind her, giving her a quick kiss on the neck.

"We have to go..." she whispered. "I'm really hungry. Is it dinner time yet?"

"Who cares."

She chuckled. Her Prince helped her put her dress back on, while he kept his torso bare, only putting his pants on. Cassandra blushed a little. Though his tone was rather dark, one could still see the red marks on his bronze skin. He was slowly pushing her to become bolder and bolder every time they had sex, now she was the one who left him covered in hickeys. Was he exposing them on purpose?

Once she was ready, Cassandra decided to let her hair down, and simply followed her prince out of the bedroom. She hadn't paid much attention when he was taking her there, but this was one of the guest bedrooms. They walked quietly back to Kareen's salon, where they could hear people talking and laughing.

It was another one of those open rooms, with lots of wild plants everywhere, a few furniture pieces with some rugs and colored cushions for them to rest on. Anour was taking care of his dragon, brushing his scales with some sort of big comb, while Shareen and Kareen were talking on the side and having tea. They all turned heads hearing the duo enter.

"Oh, look who it is!"

"Where is Missandra?" she asked, a bit worried.

“I gave her a room for her to rest, your servant girl Dahlia went to watch over her,” said Kareen. “I think our dragons chased them away. Anyway, aren’t you hungry, Cassandra?”

“I am... is it alright if we have dinner early today?”

The Imperial Concubine immediately ordered for the dinner to be prepared at once, and meanwhile, a full basket of fresh and dried fruits, along with several kinds of nuts, were brought to the young mother-to-be. Cassandra and Kairen sat down on the cushions next to Kareen’s chair. The Prince kept his arm around her, and though she was seemingly focused on the green grapes more, Cassandra was resting her back against his torso.

On the side, Shareen had a smirk on, staring at the young couple.

“I don’t know how it goes for your people, Cassie, but here, people usually keep the wild sex for the honeymoon after the wedding.”

Kairen replied with a glare, while Cassandra frowned.

“Were you eavesdropping again!”

“No, you were loud! You can’t blame me, Mother dearest here and Father are always keeping me busy. I need to find entertainment when I can!”

Cassandra sent annoyed glances at Shareen anyway. The Princess was truly too nosy about their sexual life. She would insist on them being a bit more careful from then on. They hadn’t shown much restraint, and with all the open roofs here, it was true that a lot of ears could easily hear them.

Kareen clicked her tongue.

“You unruly child! Getting to the North will hopefully cool your wild ideas!”

“Of course, Mother. When you send me to an army full of hunky soldiers...”

Kareen clicked her tongue again and tried to slap her shoulder, but Shareen was quick to move and get away from her reach. Cassandra couldn’t help but wonder how the Princess would do at the Camp. She remembered Evin, Orwen, and all the soldiers that had helped her put together the Red Room there. Even her friends at the Onyx Castle. If she hadn’t been pregnant, she probably would have gone there instead. However, it was best for her to stay here until her son was born, under Kareen’s

protection and where she could easily have access to a doctor and servants to tend to her.

“Shareen, could you deliver letters if I give them to you?” asked Cassandra.

“Where to? I’m not a courier!”

“Don’t worry, it’s for the Onyx Castle and the Army Camp. If you can even just give them to the servants there, they’ll know what to do.”

“Fine then.”

Cassandra felt a bit relieved. She would at least be able to write to Nebora and the girls, and to Evin and Orwen, too. The two men had been such help to her at the camp. She hoped they both were doing well.

The servants started bringing in dinner, as grand as usual, with lots of meats, fish, fruits, and everything Cassandra loved. After living together for a few weeks previously, the Imperial Concubine was well aware of her tastes, and the Diamond Palace was more than ready to satisfy the pregnant lady’s appetite. The smell of the cooked meat actually even attracted Krai and Roun, who started bickering again on the side when Kairen threw a big piece at them. The two young dragons obviously had more fun fighting about it than actually eating the meat. Thankfully, the garden in the open room they had dinner in, was wide enough for the two to get wild without risking injuring the humans present.

Missandra and Dahlia appeared a few minutes later, having smelled the delicious food all the way to the bedrooms. As they had all skipped lunch for various reasons, they were all more than happy to start eating early.

Cassandra was amazed a bit more every day about her tremendous appetite. She still had about three months of pregnancy ahead, but her baby had her eat almost as much as her Prince. Of course, it didn’t bother anyone around her, and actually, Kareen wasn’t surprised at all, and kept encouraging her to eat more.

Missandra too was starting to look a bit better. She was eating, and somehow, Dahlia and she seemed to have gotten closer, chatting about the herbs they could pick for the healing decoction Missandra wanted to try making.

“Lady Kareen, would it be alright for us to go out tonight?” asked Cassandra.

“Missandra has never seen the Diamond City, and their Celebrations are still going on in the streets.”

“Would it be alright for... people from the Imperial Family to go out?” whispered Missandra, a bit surprised.

“Of course!” said Kareen. “People are used to seeing me. What do they expect, that I stay locked up in my Palace all year long? I may be an Imperial Concubine, but I am a free woman and the owner and ruler of this place. Of course, we shall go. Let’s have some fun for once.”

Cassandra smiled. She was a bit excited to participate in the Celebrations in the streets like regular folks. It was something she had never been able to do as a slave, and the ones in the Palace were different from all the food stalls in the streets and the livelihood of the ordinary people.

They finished dinner calmly, only interrupted a few times by the two dragons that were trying to steal some meat as a game. Even the shy Srai showed up, and Kareen gave him the most meat, making his younger brothers sulk and try to steal from him next. The little dragon was quick to escape though, as he could crawl into small spaces they couldn’t follow.

It was fun for everyone to watch until dinner was over. Even Missandra and Dahlia, amused by their antics, seemed to forget about being scared.

Once everyone was full and ready, they prepared to go out at sunset. As always, Kareen refused to bring many servants, only a few of them. But with Anour, Shareen, and Kairen with them, they didn’t need any guards.

As they left the Diamond Palace, a whole new world opened to them. The Palace was elevated compared to the street and wasn’t echoing all of the noises properly. Everything was much more busy and chaotic down there, but Cassandra loved it. She was wearing a fur cloak over her pink dress, as the nights were a bit colder than in the Capital. However, Kairen was walking so close to her, she wouldn’t have been cold anyway. The young ones were excited to be out. Missandra had never been to the Celebrations of any other city but the Capital, and she obviously loved them. Anour, Dahlia, and her, kept running from one stall to another like children, trying the unique foods and seeing the little street shows here and there. One man was demonstrating some dancing monkeys, and a woman was doing a belly dance with some folklore music played by her children.

Somehow, the streets were actually so crowded that a lot of people didn’t notice the Imperial Family right away. The road was cleared in front of them as the passersby recognized the purple outfits and quickly got out of the way, but all of their little group was so cheerful and acting normally that a lot of people didn’t pay attention to

them. Some small children even ran into Lady Kareen at one point, but she didn't care and gently helped one of them up.

It was nice for Cassandra to be able to have fun with her sister in the streets without worrying. Missandra and her laughed together and tried some new spices, before she took it to Kairen, amused. If he was having any fun, the Prince wasn't showing it, but he stayed close to her, talking with her and touching her when he could. His hand on her shoulder, around her waist, or simply holding hers were small demonstrations of affection she loved most.

For the first time, she was hanging in the streets with her lover, almost like a normal couple. Cassandra wondered what kind of life they would have lived if they had been of normal statuses.

She sighed, and seeing the young ones were having fun at some game stall, while Kareen and Shareen were also watching, she turned to her Prince.

"What is it?" he asked.

Cassandra smiled, getting on her toes to kiss him softly.

"Nothing. I'm just really happy here. Being here with you. I want us to enjoy this as much as we can before you go."

Kairen kissed her forehead gently, wrapping his concubine in his arms.

"I didn't know you liked these kinds of things so much. The Celebrations."

"It's just... I never really got to stand among the people as a free woman or enjoy any of this before. I'm happy when I see my sister acting like the young girl she is. I'm happy when we get to stroll like this, without any threats, any plots, or any rivals."

The atmosphere of the Imperial Palace was so suffocating at times, Cassandra couldn't help but feel such a difference now that she was out. Even if it was for a short time, she just wanted to enjoy this as much as she could.

Kairen kissed her again, caressing her cheek. They were in the middle of the street, in the middle of a crowd, but neither really cared. There were dozens of lovers here, many couples just enjoying the Celebrations. They were just a little bit differently clothed.

“I’ll bring you here again for the Celebrations next year,” he whispered softly. “And all the years you want after that.”

“Is that a promise?” she asked with a smile.

“Yes.”

He grabbed her chin and gently sealed their promise with a long kiss. Cassandra smiled against her Prince’s lips, enjoying this little minute of intimacy with him. There was something unique about being able to act like this with her lover, in the middle of a busy street. Like she could show her love to the world, without fear of judgment. A few weeks ago, she was always so afraid of what people would say, what people would think. Now, she was able to act however she wanted with him. Somehow, she had become so comforted by Kairen’s feelings, she knew nothing could stop her love for him anymore. Cassandra didn’t care much if he wasn’t vocal about it. He was telling her just enough when she actually needed it.

“Hinue! Look!”

Missandra ran up to them, and ecstatic, put a big flower crown on her older sister’s head. She had a wide smile on and had apparently forgotten all her hatred for the Imperial Family. Cassandra was so happy to finally see her act her age. She had one of those big flower crowns on too, and behind her, Dahlia was playing with some flower bracelets.

“Aren’t these pretty! Should you get one for the ceremony? Come!”

Missandra pulled her to come to the flower stall, and check all of the flower crowns. It was the first time she showed interest in the Rain Ceremony, so Cassandra was happy to check out the items displayed with her. For once, they felt like a pair of sisters hanging out naturally, having fun with their friends, and chatting happily over trivial matters.

Cassandra was made to try several crowns by Dahlia and Missandra, so many that her hair was covered in petals after a while. The merchant was happy to have caught the girl’s attention and was overdoing it with the flattery.

“Those white lilies are so fresh, and suit Your Highness so well! You should try it! Your hair is so beautiful, any of those look perfect on you!”

Cassandra chuckled. White lilies again! She picked the flower crown, made of ivy, white lilies, and pink lisianthus among some filler leaves. Putting it on in her hair,

Cassandra checked herself in the mirror, blushing a bit. She rarely felt so pretty. That evening, her hair was down, she was wearing the pale dress that complimented her rosy cheeks so well, and radiating with happiness.

She turned to Kairen, standing behind her, to show it.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

He nodded, but he was clearly looking at her instead of the crown. Cassandra smiled and turned to the merchant.

“Could you pack this up for me?” she gently asked.

“What are you talking about! You should keep it on,” said Missandra with a cute pout, Dahlia nodding behind her.

“Your sister is right.”

Behind them, Kareen and Shareen walked up to them, both looking at the crowns of flowers. The merchant immediately bowed politely to Lady Kareen. Like many people around them, he recognized the ruler and owner of the City. The Imperial Concubine handed him some money.

“You young ladies should have fun. Have your sister and that servant of yours pick some, too.”

Immediately, Missandra and Dahlia’s eyes shined in excitement. Those flower crowns were expensive, not something they would have been able to spend their pocket money on. However, the shiny gold coins the Imperial Concubine had handed the merchant were more than enough for them to pick anything they wanted.

They both thanked Kareen profusely, and started picking some flower crowns for themselves, even bullying Anour into trying some too. Shareen chuckled, crossing her arms while watching the scene.

“A Prince being forced to wear a flower crown by two servant girls. This world is really changing faster than I thought! Mother, you can’t spend it all on Anour and the girls. What about your actual daughter?”

The Imperial Concubine sneered.

“What about her?”

Shareen frowned, crossing her arms and pouting.

“Aren’t you going to buy me anything, Mother? With this heavy purse of yours? When do you ever gift me something?”

“Gift you something?” said Kareen, turning to her with her eyebrow raised. “When does this daughter of mine ever visit her mother? I’m already this old, yet neither of my children pampers me or worries about me. What should I buy you anything for? You heartless children seem to be doing well enough without me!”

Cassandra had the hardest time repressing her laugh while Kareen walked away, looking as proud as ever, and pushing Dahlia and Missandra to come and see some food stalls, probably to spoil them more and anger Shareen.

Meanwhile, the Princess stayed speechless.

“That old witch! Old, her? Who is old! She’s going to bury us all!”

Kairen didn’t seem much surprised or affected by their mother’s rant, but Shareen went on to sulk and complain about Kareen’s attitude. Cassandra chuckled. Despite acting like this towards each other, it was obvious they loved their mother. Even more so watching Krai’s attitude with the Imperial Concubine.

She grabbed Kairen’s hand and pulled him to follow the group, though they walked slowly, keeping a little intimate space around them.

“Why don’t you visit your mother more often?” she asked.

“I don’t know... I usually spend my time at the Military Camp.”

Cassandra nodded. Shareen had mentioned before that their mother was a bit too nosy about her private “activities”. And from what Cassandra herself had seen or experienced, she was sure Kareen wouldn’t have approved either.

She caressed her little tummy that was sticking out more and more every day.

“What are you thinking?” asked her Prince, seeing her lost in her thoughts.

“I hope our son will visit me often when I’m older. I’d be sad if he didn’t.”

Kairen frowned a bit, looking concerned about her words. Cassandra wondered if this was making him reflect on his attitude, but didn’t ask. They walked a bit longer, in silence, following the little group ahead that was enthusiastically checking the stalls.

Apparently, Lady Kareen was only too happy to spoil the younger ones, probably a bit to piss off Shareen too.

“Who will you love more?”

“What?” asked Cassandra, surprised by his sudden question.

“Who will you love more? Between our son and me?”

She was so stunned by his question, she stayed speechless for a while. However, Kairen couldn't have looked more serious, with his usual frown on and dark eyes. Cassandra sighed, trying hard not to laugh.

“My Prince... You can't compare love like that. A mother's love is something unique.”

“Does that mean you love him more?”

Cassandra chuckled this time, shaking her head.

“Do you think your mother loves you more than the Emperor?”

“Yes.”

Well, maybe that wasn't the best example to use. Cassandra thought for a minute.

“What about Princess Shareen then? Do you think your mother loves her more?”

This time, Kairen looked baffled by her question. He glanced his mother's way, frowning a bit more, and Cassandra waited for him. It was amusing that he would be so baffled by such a simple thing as a mother's love. Sometimes her Prince had this incredibly childish side to him. He could fight and win any battle in this world, but jealousy or matters of the heart were a real problem for him to understand.

Cassandra got on her toes and kissed his cheek, ending his deep thinking with a gentle smile.

“Love doesn't need to be shared or compared. It's unique and endless. I love my baby so much, and I love you too. I love you both, but differently.”

The Prince nodded, and replied to her kiss with one on her forehead, then her nose, until he got to her lips. She wasn't sure he had fully understood, but at least, he wasn't frowning anymore, her lips were keeping him busy enough.

Suddenly, Cassandra felt some droplets falling on her. She looked up and, sure enough, rain was starting to fall. She smiled wide, exchanging a glance with her Prince.

“The rain!”

However, the little drops were now starting to come by the hundreds, and the rain was rapidly increasing around them. Kareen and the rest of their group quickly gathered, everyone trying to cover themselves.

“We should head back,” said Shareen. “The locals say this isn’t just going to be some light rain, there’s a storm coming, and they get nasty in this area!”

Everyone agreed and, quickly, they walked back to the Diamond Palace. No one had been expecting that rain. The streets were quickly cleared, as the merchants were closing up their stalls and putting their merchandise into a safe place.

The Palace wasn’t far, but by the time they got there, everyone was soaked. The servants ran to hand them some towels to wipe themselves with, but the young Imperial Concubine was a bit upset at her disheveled hair and messy clothes.

“What a mess.”

Like the locals had said, it wasn’t just a downpour. Above them, the wind picked up, and the claps of thunder and lightning flashes cloaked the sky in no time. This was truly a thunderstorm, not just rain. In the Diamond Palace, so many rooms had open roofs, Cassandra could hear the rain all around them. Of course, the servants had quickly moved the furniture where it needed to be, being used to the rain, but so many rooms were now unusable.

“Well, someone wanted rain,” sighed Shareen.

“Should we wait until it calms down, Cassandra dear?” asked Kareen.

The young concubine nodded, looking a bit sad.

“It can’t be helped. It would be too dangerous to go out in this weather.”

If it wasn’t for the wind and lightning, this rain would actually have been perfect for the Ceremony, but Cassandra had to admit, the current conditions weren’t good. The wind would have blown things away, and that lightning would be dangerous for anyone outside.

Feeling her disappointment, Kairen suddenly lifted her up.

“Kairen?” she asked, taken by surprise.

Without explaining a thing, the Prince slowly walked out of the room, leaving everyone else behind, and took Cassandra deeper inside the Diamond Palace. She couldn't help but wonder where he was taking her. She could hear Krai climbing the walls around them and following their path from the outside, but those rooms around them were some she had never been to before, she couldn't tell where they were. Kairen was obviously very familiar with the Diamond Palace. He was navigating easily, avoiding the rooms being flooded or taking corridors where they could avoid the downpour from the open roofs.

Finally, he put her down in front of a large door and pushed it open. Cassandra took a minute to understand. It was obviously a bathroom and a very large one at that. Actually, the large basin was overflowing with water. This room didn't have a fully open roof per se, but some openings in the walls were letting the heavy rain through, and it was slowly adding up. However, the most interesting part of that room was that instead of being surrounded by four or six walls like most rooms, this one had only five. One part of the wall had been left open, giving her an incredible view of the city, and access for Krai to sneak its head in. The large basin was actually going all the way to that open part, and the excess water was being poured down below, overflowing the border of the basin.

She was amazed. This was such a strange room, and the tub was almost working as a large natural fountain, being filled by rainwater and flowing on the lower levels. She wanted to get in and go see the full view, but with this windy weather, it was obvious she should stay in the covered part.

To her surprise, Kairen walked in first, taking off his clothes and going into the water. Behind him, Krai growled, and without warning, spat fire.

Cassandra was afraid, seeing Krai do that for the first time, but the dragon wasn't doing it in her direction. Actually, it was burning the water next to Kairen, and shortly after, some vapor was visible. Cassandra chuckled and put her feet in the water. It was warm!

Krai's fire had heated the water, turning this place into a hot pool. She chuckled and took the hand Kairen was offering her to walk in.

Cassandra took his hand, blushing slightly, but followed him into the water. She had only taken off her shoes and newly-bought flower crown. Her dress was already wet

after all, and she was a bit too shy to venture in a half-open bath completely naked. Even if her Prince had taken off all of his clothes, he didn't say anything about her not doing the same, and gently pulled her in.

Kairen was carrying Cassandra on his lap, making her chuckle. She had no idea how deep this bath really was, but she could tell her Prince was navigating around easily. He took her as far as he could in this pool before the curtain of rain. She was amazed. Not only was the view of the Diamond City absolutely breathtaking, but the majesty of this infinity pool was truly beautiful. Cassandra felt that if her Prince were to swim a bit too far, they would fall out. She couldn't see the edge, as the rain was actually blurring the real limit of the water and confusing her perception, making it both exciting and scary. They stayed back far enough though, remaining under the roofed part.

The Black Dragon, standing outside but sticking its head in, didn't seem to mind the downpour much. The rain was rolling down the black scales, while its red eyes were focused on the couple. Cassandra, her arms locked around her Prince, couldn't stop smiling. Her whole body was floating in this warm water. It wasn't nearly as hot as the hot springs from the North, but the difference in temperature with the cold rain still made a thin layer of mist float around. It was such a unique scene. Even the room itself was somewhere between eerie and ancient, as if before them, no one had come here in years. Cassandra absolutely loved it.

"This is amazing," she whispered.

"You like it?"

She nodded and turned to her Prince, brushing his hair gently.

"Why did you think to bring me here?"

"You enjoyed the hot springs... and you seemed sad we couldn't hold the Ceremony yet."

Cassandra's heart melted once again. How could this man always surprise her with this extreme gentleness and consideration he was hiding under his armor? She nodded, and gently kissed him.

She loved any form of bath and he knew it. She loved when they took baths together; the simple sensation of her body immersed in water was one of the most comforting feelings in this world to her. Of course, it was even better when her Prince was by her side like this. They kept kissing for a while, tenderly, though their bodies were

obviously really close to one another. The layers of her dress were floating around her in the water, while she curled her legs around Kairen's, holding on to him.

A low growl distracted them a bit. They both turned their heads as Krai was putting the lower part of its maw in the water, staring at them. Cassandra couldn't see it as its body was outside, but she was sure the black dragon was wagging its tail. She had learned to recognize that playful look in the ruby eyes.

The dragon couldn't fit more than its shoulders inside, but it was still plenty enough. Cassandra smiled, and detached herself from her Prince to go play with the dragon. Krai growled happily, seeing her approach. She gently rubbed its snout, and to play with the dragon a little she dived underneath the surface. She felt the dragon's snout, looking for her in the water, but Krai wasn't a water creature. When she emerged a few feet away, the dragon turned its head, surprised, making her laugh. Krai growled and put its snout in the water, suddenly throwing a whole wave at her. Cassandra laughed and dived in again.

This little game between them lasted quite a while. However, after a few minutes, while she was in the water, Cassandra felt some human hands grab her.

Kairen lifted her up, pulling her into his embrace again. She chuckled.

"Were you feeling lonely, my Prince?"

"Don't just play with him."

Cassandra laughed and kissed him, focusing on her Prince despite the jealous growls. With the rain in the background, the sounds of the water, and her dripping hair, she almost felt at home. She and her Prince kept kissing lovingly, swimming around in the water as if they were alone.

However, Cassandra suddenly paused their kiss, frowning.

"What is it?"

"I..."

She went silent again, with a confused expression. Did she just imagine it? She grabbed Kairen's hand and pulled it next to hers against her tummy. He touched her right in time and a second later, it was his turn to have a shocked expression. Cassandra chuckled again, ecstatic.

“Did you feel that?” she whispered.

The Prince nodded, keeping his large hand spread out on her stomach. He had felt it. A little bump under her skin, so weak he had almost missed it. He stayed there again, waiting.

“I feel him again,” she whispered. “Oh, God... He’s moving.”

Kairen frowned. He couldn’t feel it anymore, or maybe it was too faint. Yet, Cassandra was completely absorbed in the baby’s faint movements. She hadn’t thought she would be able to feel them so early! However, it wasn’t a mistake. This wasn’t her stomach, but her son; she could feel some little movements. Sometimes, they were too faint for her to be sure, and other times, she was sure. They stayed like this for a while, but nothing else happened.

It was plenty enough, though. Cassandra couldn’t stop smiling from ear to ear. Kairen grabbed her hair and gently pulled her closer to him for another kiss. Somehow, he didn’t seem to want to take his hand off of her belly, as if he was still hoping for another little hit.

“You have to come back to see our son,” Cassandra whispered, suddenly becoming much more serious.

“Why are you so afraid?”

“I don’t know. I have a bad feeling,” she confessed. “Maybe it’s just my pregnancy making me more worried. I just don’t like that you won’t be here.”

She sighed and snuggled against his neck, closing her eyes, feeling the warmth of his skin. Kairen frowned, caressing her gently. He hadn’t realized how much Cassandra needed him more because of her pregnancy. Somehow, she was a bit needier, looking for more of their cuddling than before. He wasn’t sure if it was due to their relationship growing or part of the pregnancy, or both.

He kept caressing her, letting her rest against his shoulder. He had thought of bringing her here to comfort her, but truly, comforting a pregnant woman was harder than expected. Would she really be alright staying here with his mother? The Prince was a bit afraid the young concubine would be lonely or feel too bored. He definitely couldn’t bring her to the battlefield, though. He wouldn’t even have let her anywhere near a military camp, not when she was pregnant.

“I will be back as soon as I can.”

“I know...and it’s your duty. I know it can’t be helped. I just don’t like that we will be separated again.”

“I’ll stay with you as long as you want after the war is over. I’ll take you back to the Onyx Castle.”

Cassandra chuckled. How did he know she missed that place the most? Somehow, she had grown attached to that lonely, isolated castle in the last few months, she was surprised herself to be missing it so much. She nodded against his skin.

After a while, however, the wind picked up even stronger and Krai flew away, annoyed. Without the dragon to heat it up, the water was going to get cold soon. Cassandra and Kairen got out of the water while they were still feeling warm. Somehow, right behind the doors, the servants had already brought some thick towels. Cassandra abandoned her dress there, knowing someone would come and pick it up, and wrapped herself in one of the very large towels. Once again, the War God, who never seemed to feel the cold, only wrapped it around his hips, letting his natural heat dry him.

He picked Cassandra up off the ground and carried her gently back to their room to change into her nightgown. She was now dry, but the young concubine still took her time brushing her messy hair and put it up into a long braid for the night. The servants had brought a little tray of food, including her favorite green grapes and cheese cubes, with some mulled wine. Surely, Lady Kareen had ordered this.

Cassandra felt a bit guilty for wanting to eat again, but she couldn’t help it. She sat on the bed, grabbing the little bowl of grapes, and pouring some of the cheese cubes on top. For some reason, she almost wanted to see the cheese melt on top of it. Kairen laid down next to her, he had already helped himself to some wine and was caressing her back, letting her eat all she wanted.

“It’s really impressive. I’m hungrier than I ever was, even when I had been unable to eat for days. Babies are truly something,” she whispered.

“Are you tired? Or is your back painful?”

Cassandra stretched her back a bit. It was true her lower back pain was constant those days, but it was a really mild pain, not something she would complain about. At least she was grateful to be over her nausea. She hadn’t had any for several days now.

“I’m fine... Just hungry like a dragon.”

Kairen chuckled and kept rubbing her back. When Cassandra leaned to take the mulled wine, however, he frowned.

“Cassandra.”

“Just a little sip on my tongue,” she promised. “For the taste.”

Despite his frowning, he let her take a little bit, as promised. He was afraid his mother’s bad habits would slowly transfer onto the young concubine somehow. Hence, Kairen was quick to take the glass out of her hands and finish it in one go. Cassandra didn’t even protest. Her thoughts were already elsewhere.

“The baby... Maybe we should find him a name already.”

“You can pick whatever you want.”

“Really?”

Kairen nodded. He didn’t really care, and trusted Cassandra fully. The young concubine wasn’t surprised or disappointed. She slowly smiled, trying to think. She would have loved to give the baby a name from the Rain Tribe, but this was a future dragon Prince they were talking about. She couldn’t risk picking something too odd. What about a Dragon Empire name then? She quite liked them.

“How did your mother pick your name? And Shareen’s? Do you know?”

“She just took hers and twisted it. concubines like to give names similar to theirs to their children.”

Cassandra could understand. Among the many, many children of the Emperor, this was a way to remind him of themselves through their children. She doubted Kareen had exactly the same idea, though. It was probably her own possessiveness over her children rather than her relationship to the Emperor that had prevailed.

“Kairen?”

“Hm?”

“What about... your siblings? The others? Do you know their names?”

He nodded.

“My mother has them buried here. I saw their names on the stones. Suiren, Shaneen, Kassen.”

Cassandra felt her heart pinch a bit at each name. She couldn't forget the painful words of the Imperial Concubine over her children's deaths. There was one question she had been curious about, though.

“How is Srai still alive? I thought a dragon died after his tamer passed, but there are exceptions, aren't there?”

“He was old enough. Newborn dragons are more fragile. Most die with us if we die young.”

Cassandra nodded. That explained why Srai had been the only one to survive. According to Kareen, the young Suiren, her firstborn, had died at six. Apparently, it was enough for his dragon to survive, even disabled. But her second and fourth children had died as infants. She put protective hands around her belly. How did the abandoned dragons feel? Missing a part of themselves. She couldn't imagine Krai without Kairen, or the other way around. Would her baby be as close to his dragon? She couldn't wait to meet both of them. Her two babies, the human and the dragon one. Cassandra silently promised herself: with or without Kairen, she would protect their child. She would do anything for him.

“Cassandra.”

He gently pulled her into his embrace, taking her away from her deep thinking. Cassandra chuckled, putting her half-emptied bowl to the side, and snuggled against him.

“I'm tired,” she said.

“Then sleep. If the rain calms down, we will have our Ceremony tomorrow morning.”

“I hope so.”

Cassandra had no problem falling asleep that evening. She was soothed by the sounds of the downpour outside, the wind shimmering in the leaves, and the slow breathing of the Prince against her ear. A peaceful sleep after a nice evening outing, and a long, warm bath was just the best.