

Chapter 17

Cassandra slowly woke up to some rummaging behind the door. She frowned, wondering what was going on. If she focused enough, she could hear a bit of the conversation...

“But... It’s been two days...”

“I told you, they are fine! Just leave it here. They eat it, don’t they? Just come and clean it up later. Don’t disturb them, they’ll come out when they have had enough.”

“Oh... I see...”

Cassandra sighed and snuggled inside Kairen’s arms. Had it been two days already? They hadn’t parted and left the bed except for taking the trays of food inside and back outside. Her last three nights and two days had been filled with love and sex. She felt like they had gone into their own little bubble, away from time. Or maybe just trying to forget about time. She wasn’t ready to part with him yet, but she probably never would be.

Kairen’s slow breathing above her head made her a bit sad. She didn’t want to have to sleep alone, without the sounds of her partner beside her. He had become everything to her. The fact that she knew this was going to come to an end was devastating her, making it so much worse. She didn’t know when, she just knew that it was going to happen soon. Cassandra hated the wait. The only way for her to forget was to sleep or have sex with her Prince. Somehow, she hated feeling depressed before he was even gone.

She sat on the bed, sighing and pushing her hair away from her face. Of course, behind her, Kairen immediately reacted, and came to wrap her in his arms.

“What is it?” he whispered against her ear.

“I just... I need to do something. I’m going to go crazy if I just stay here thinking about how you’re going to leave soon.”

“Are you sad?”

“I don’t think I’m sad...yet.”

Cassandra turned around, kissing him gently, brushing his beard with her fingers. It had already grown back a little. Then, she took a deep breath and smiled softly.

“I’ll be alright. Just focus on the war, and I will focus on our baby.”

Kairen nodded, agreeing with her. Cassandra gently kissed him again and left the bed to go and see what clothes she could put on. She didn’t want to stay locked in this room anymore. It had been a bit too long already, and she didn’t want to be rude to their host, Lady Kareen, or make her sister unhappy. Kairen grabbed the food tray to bring inside while she washed using the little water basin, and they ate together in silence.

When they were both full, dressed, and ready to go, they walked out of the bedroom. The Diamond Palace was actually rather quiet. First, Cassandra wanted to go and check on the Dragon Egg. It was a bit of a funny feeling, but she felt like she had neglected her baby by not going to see the egg for a while. Once they got there, to her surprise, Krai was wrapped around it sleeping. She chuckled.

The Black Dragon woke up, and watched her come close, but did not want to leave its egg, letting Cassandra approach instead. She got on her knees right next to the dragon, and Krai’s snout sniffed her belly, rubbing against her dress curiously. She scratched the dark snout a bit, but her hand was busier touching the egg. It was still warm, with this strange light moving inside. It was almost as if something was beating inside. Actually, the egg seemed even warmer than she remembered, almost hot now. How many more weeks until she gave birth? At this rate, it would be burning hot before her baby was born!

Krai softly growled when Kairen approached, and the War God also scratched its head. It was rare for the two to interact directly. Cassandra watched them for a while, but she was more distracted by the egg. She had grown attached to it a lot, and couldn’t wait to meet both the baby dragon and her baby. The egg was already so big, she wondered what size a newborn dragon could be? Maybe it was half full of liquid in there, or maybe the baby dragon was already as big as that?

“Oh, look who finally came out of the den!”

They turned around. Kareen was just at the entrance of the garden, followed by some servants carrying meat. She smiled widely and walked up to them. Krai, excited, suddenly got up, smelling the meat.

“Good Morning, Lady Kareen,” said Cassandra.

“Good Morning, dear. You look well-rested!”

Cassandra blushed a bit. The Imperial Concubine couldn't ignore that they had just spent two days in bed. Of course, she would be rested, having done nothing but sleep and...the rest.

“How come you are feeding Krai here?” asked Cassandra, a bit curious.

The dragon would usually leave the Diamond Palace, or wherever they were staying, to go and feed by itself. It was a good enough hunter to provide for itself. It only came around to steal some meat from their meals out of gluttony, not hunger.

“That big boy doesn't need me!” laughed Kareen. “This is for Srai. Srai, come here baby.”

Suddenly, a Purple Dragon's head popped up from behind Krai. Cassandra hadn't noticed Srai was here! The other dragon was so tiny, Krai's body could easily hide it. Srai climbed over its younger brother, and wiggled all the way to Lady Kareen, though Krai was right behind, the ruby eyes fixed on the meat.

“Don't move, Krai,” said Kareen with her motherly voice.

The Black Dragon growled softly, sulking a bit, but stayed where it was, with no choice but to watch its older brother eat the meat. Srai's owner had died at six years old. Would that mean her future baby dragon was going to be even tinier than that? Cassandra couldn't be sure, though. Sephir and Vrehan's dragons were both smaller than Krai. It was really too hard to say, though Lady Kareen had hinted before that their dragon would probably be on the bigger side.

“Stop sulking you big boy, you should go out and hunt if you're hungry!” said Kareen, scolding Krai who was still growling, upset.

“Didn't he go hunting yet today?” asked Cassandra.

“He went this morning, but he's been glued to his egg for as long as you two were locked in that room. He only leaves it to go hunting. I don't know what's wrong with him. Kairen?”

Both women turned to the War God, but Kairen stayed mute, looking at the egg with a little frown. Cassandra, however, was the quickest to understand what was going on.

They didn't want to leave. Just like Kairen had kept her in the bedroom for three nights and two days, Krai didn't want to part with its egg. The dragon probably didn't want to part with Cassandra, either. The pair were dreading this war, unwilling to part with their loved ones. This truth hit Cassandra right in the heart. She hadn't realized before. Because her prince seldom showed his feelings and was always so attached to her anyway, she hadn't even thought about how he could feel about leaving her here in the Diamond Palace. She had focused on her own feelings alone, and only realized now how selfish and self-centered that was of her.

Kairen was the one who had to leave. He was the one who would have to go to war, to fulfill his duty as the Third Prince, the God of War of the Dragon Empire, while she'd stay back. Cassandra would be safe here in the Diamond Palace, while her lover was sent to the frontline. Underneath the armor, the War God was a man. Just a man, who had learned to muffle his feelings his whole life. However, Krai was a mirror of its owner's feelings. It didn't want to leave them.

Cassandra got up and walked up to him, putting her arms around his chest, hugging him gently. Kairen didn't answer much, aside from putting his hand on her lower back, and playing with her hair.

"Oh... I like this new hairstyle, Son," said Kareen, inspecting it from a bit closer. "Perfect for going to war..."

"It better be soon!" yelled someone behind her.

Shareen appeared, stealing some meat from the dragons. Cassandra frowned a bit, as it was raw meat, but obviously, the Princess couldn't care less and was eating it directly off the bone. Lady Kareen clicked her tongue.

"Shareen, your manners!"

"I am starving, Mother. I trained all morning with those useless guards of yours, they better get back in shape before I come back, or I'll have all those idiots replaced. Anyway, is the honeymoon over you two? I hope you do know you can't put another baby in before this one is out, though, right?"

Cassandra decided to ignore her. She was used to Shareen's crude ways by now, and she was almost expecting it at this point.

"Enough, enough. I'm hungry, too. Let's have a late morning brunch, before you end up fighting with my babies," said Kareen, walking back inside.

Cassandra chuckled. Anything was an excuse to have brunch for Lady Kareen, as she liked holding big feasts for breakfast no matter how late or early in the day it was. Hearing her call both dragons her babies was so endearingly cute.

They all walked back inside, but to Cassandra's surprise, though Missandra and Dahlia were here, Anour didn't show up. When she asked about it, Missandra frowned, and Shareen chuckled.

"The young ones had a bit of a fight last night, so he's been sulking. Don't worry, that big baby will show up eventually."

"A fight? What did you fight with Anour about?" asked Cassandra, turning to Missandra.

Her younger sister pouted a bit.

"He kept saying how a woman will always be weaker than a man, and wouldn't change his mind. So, I challenged him."

"You fought with Anour? Missandra!"

"What? I lost anyway!" protested the younger sister.

Shareen laughed loudly.

"You barely lost, and that's what upset Anour. He struggled so much not to hurt you he got a big black eye, so now that idiot is reflecting. Well done, by the way, Missie."

"Stop calling me that," whispered Missandra with a cute pout.

Cassandra couldn't help but smile, thinking about how her younger sister had learned from her mistakes and was finally changing her attitude towards the Imperial Family. Of course, she shouldn't fight, but from what she had heard, this was just normal bickering between teenagers.

They set up for another brunch in one of the gardens, and Cassandra finally felt a bit better than before. Maybe staying in bed for so long had gotten to her. She felt better now, sitting in the garden, breathing in some fresh air, and spending time with everyone.

Suddenly, loud noises were heard from the outside. The ruckus had lots of people cheering, and applauding. A servant came running inside the garden, but they all already knew what was going on.

“The Imperial Army has arrived, Your Highnesses! They are asking to see the Third Prince Kairen, the War God of the Dragon Empire!”

Cassandra’s heart sank at those words. The Army had arrived even faster than she thought.

Somehow, Kairen, Anour, and Shareen got ready to leave incredibly fast. A couple of representatives from the army showed up, but there wasn’t much time to lose. The news from the Eastern Front wasn’t good, they had to go as fast as possible. Hence, there wasn’t much ceremony involved, but everything was done in sad silence. Once everything was packed and ready, all dragons and humans gathered at the entrance of the Diamond Palace. Cassandra could even feel Krai’s unhappiness, as the dragon was lethargic, its head turned towards the direction of the egg.

The young concubine approached the dragon, scratching its maw gently.

“Don’t worry... I’ll take care of our babies,” she whispered to him.

The dragon growled sadly, rubbing its head against her belly. She stayed there until Kairen had said goodbye to his mother, and finally turned to her.

She sighed, but she couldn’t say a word. Her throat was already choked up, despite her best attempt not to cry. The Prince gently took her in his arms. Cassandra hid her face in his shoulder, trying to inhale deeply, to remember his smell and his warmth. She really wasn’t ready to let go.

“Stay safe,” he whispered to her. “Take care of yourself and the baby. Eat well, sleep well... I’ll be back soon.”

“I know...”

She wanted to tell him the same, to stay safe and healthy, but the words didn’t come. Instead, she started tearing up, and raised her eyes to look at him. She was going to miss him so much, again. Finally, she put her hands on his face, and kissed him longingly. This was going to be their last kiss for a long time. She needed that taste on her lips to linger for as long as possible.

“By the great Golden Dragon, how much cheesier and mushier can you two get? Alright, that’s it, I’m out of here,” declared Shareen.

The two lovers separated slowly, and Kairen put one last kiss on her forehead.

“I’ll be back soon,” he repeated.

Cassandra nodded sadly, and took a couple of steps back. Kareen came to her side, putting an arm around her shoulder as they watched Kairen, Shareen, Anour, and the two dragons fly away, leading the Army.

Cassandra broke down in tears a few minutes later. After Kairen’s departure, Cassandra was sad for a couple of days. However, she knew she couldn’t stay like that forever. Once she was done crying, she tried to spend time with Kareen, Missandra, and Dahlia, and keep herself busy. Somehow, they all cooperated to keep her occupied.

Lady Kareen was used to her children being gone and having to find hobbies for herself. As it turned out, she was rather busy as the City’s owner and Mayor already, but she still found time to have other hobbies. She liked painting and tried to talk Cassandra into it. Though the young concubine wasn’t fond of it, Missandra was interested, and even proved herself to be a good student. Eventually, Cassandra was used as a model a couple of times, as it allowed her to rest yet spend time chatting with them.

There was something else Lady Kareen did for her, however. Somehow, the Imperial Concubine was well aware of Kairen’s present for Cassandra in the Imperial Palace, and decided to give her a little garden in the Diamond Palace, too. This was probably the most successful attempt at cheering Cassandra up.

Once she started taking care of her plants, studying the books she was given about them, or writing herself, Cassandra didn’t notice the hours pass by. Missandra would join her often, to learn from her, as well as share her knowledge on the matter. Somehow, the two sisters started working on new hybrid species, trying to grow sprouts that would survive in the Shadelands. This little project was keeping Cassandra busy, and also helping her remember that, sometime soon, she would be able to go back to the Onyx Castle with Kairen. Anything was good to keep herself busy. She’d write, chat with Kareen and Missandra, work on her plants, write about new medicines, go to the local markets, study more books, and find more things to keep herself busy with.

That workaholic behavior of hers started worrying Kareen and Missandra a bit, as it never seemed like the young concubine took a break, despite her belly growing quickly. Cassandra was busy, too busy. She’d spend all day working on one thing and then another, only stopping to eat. The Imperial Concubine was starting to dislike this obsessive behavior and insisted on Missandra and Dahlia watching her more closely.

However, one day, Kareen unexpectedly found her napping in the Dragon Egg's garden. Cassandra was wrapped up in a warm blanket and had fallen asleep with some of her notes, right next to the egg. The discreet Dahlia was watching her from afar, making sure she wouldn't get sick. She silently smiled at Lady Kareen when their eyes met, meaning she already knew about Cassandra's little naps. After that, the Imperial Concubine decided not to be on Cassandra's back so much. When she wasn't constantly watched, Cassandra would eventually take breaks by herself, always agreeing to Dahlia's suggestion for some tea, or a stroll in the gardens.

Unknown to Kareen, however, the hardest times for Cassandra were at night. The young concubine hadn't imagined she would have so much trouble falling asleep by herself. The idea of going back to an empty bed haunted her every day after dusk. She would drag on the time to go back to her bedroom, find excuses to stay up late with Lady Kareen or her notes, and when she had no choice but to go, she'd turn sad and silent. Dahlia had set up a little routine for her, where the young concubine would take a long hot bath in her bedroom, and chat with her about her day. Helping Cassandra bathe, wash her hair, and brush it before bed, somehow helped her get sleepy and fall asleep more easily. The weather was getting a bit colder, so Dahlia brought in little scented candles, finding the ones that supposedly helped with insomnia.

Her pregnancy was also a big help in keeping Cassandra from doing too much and tiring herself out. Somehow, reaching the seventh month made her more tired than ever before, and she started taking naps by herself. Her growing, large belly was incapacitating her in several ways, giving Dahlia and Missandra more excuses to stay around and help her.

Eventually, Cassandra's sadness passed. She wasn't over Kairen's absence, but at least she had reverted back to her old self and didn't look as sad or on the verge of crying anymore. Truth was, Cassandra had spent many nights crying silently, but she couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't stand being a shadow of herself. She was even more worried it would impact her baby negatively. From then on, she started every day with a big breath, something to look forward to, and did her best to live her days eating well and resting well, as she had promised her Prince. When she missed him, she'd caress the little bracelet of hair around her wrist, or go to see the dragon's Egg. Somehow, Cassandra got a bit better by herself, and life went on for everyone at the Diamond Castle.

After a few more weeks, however, Cassandra could tell something was wrong. There was no way Kareen hadn't gotten any news about the Eastern War yet. It had been more than two months already. When she mentioned it to her, the Imperial Concubine always pretended like she was going to ask about it soon, or was waiting to hear from some of her spies. Cassandra couldn't take it anymore. After a while, she had even

received answers from the people at the Onyx Castle and the North Army camp by a normal message-carrier service. There was no way Kareen had absolutely no news about the war against the Eastern Republic!

That morning, she insisted once again, and this time persisted until she got the truth, with Missandra's support. After half an hour of arguing, Kareen was exasperated.

"You're so stubborn!"

"I need to know the truth! I know my Prince is out there fighting! I can wait but I can't stand not having any news, and I know you must have some information! That is all I ask, Lady Kareen!"

The Imperial Concubine looked like she was about to throw her cup of tea across the room. Instead, she slammed it on the table, and rolled her eyes.

"Gosh, I didn't think you could be as stubborn as my children! Fine, I will tell you!"

"Really? So you know something?"

"Of course I do! Who do you think I am? There isn't a city in this Empire I don't have a spy in! Anyway, I did get some news half a month ago. While Shareen is perfectly fine in the North, on Kairen's side, the Eastern Army somehow got further into our territory than we thought. The Capital was actually notified very late of the attack, someone there didn't, or couldn't, do their job correctly. By the time Kairen got there, the situation was very messy, and you can't have a dragon simply burn everything down when your enemies are spread in your own city, among our people."

"Oh God, no..." whispered Cassandra, shocked.

She hadn't imagined the situation was that bad! All this time, Shareen and Kairen had made it sound like this would be a simple task that would be solved easily. Cassandra had no idea the frontline was in such a bad situation, even before Kairen had gotten there.

"That's why things are complicated. He has to wipe out the enemy and push them back to the frontier, but those imbecile Republicans have realized that Krai won't attack, or at least fire, while they are still inside the Dragon Empire. So all of their strategies seem to focus on staying in."

"Since when does the Eastern Republic know so much about dragons?" asked Missandra. "Those tactics don't sound like theirs at all."

“I know,” sighed Kareen. “That is what worries me. I wouldn’t be surprised if a little rat had gone ahead to give them those bad ideas.”

“Lady Kareen, do you think... The Second Prince could have...”

However, the Imperial Concubine raised her hand to stop Cassandra.

“Let’s be careful and keep what we think to ourselves for now. I already wrote to the Imperial Palace, but that snake Vrehan hasn’t left his apartments there since we left. Apparently on the pretense of looking after his sister.”

“He definitely has people to do it for him!” said Missandra. “Everyone knows the Imp... I mean, people like him never dirty their hands themselves.”

Kareen smiled, but this was more of a scary smile than a heartfelt smile, and nodded.

“That’s right, dear. Just like me, he probably has people working for him. Vrehan is much smarter than Phetra. She’s the type who will dirty her own hands, if she’s pushed over the limit. However, Vrehan learned a lot from his snake mother. He loves to scheme and get rid of people who annoy him without leaving traces. You can never, ever be alone with him or his people. I don’t believe he’d stay locked up under the Emperor’s nose only for his sister’s sake, either. This sounds too much like some trick he’d be pulling off.”

“Can’t we do anything?” asked Cassandra.

“I have sent people to watch him, but he probably knows that too. In any case, Vrehan won’t move until he’s sure he can win, and I don’t see how he could do that. No matter what, my son is the War God. He won’t lose a war just because it started late.”

Cassandra slowly nodded, but she didn’t feel reassured. Kairen wasn’t like Vrehan, someone who’d plot behind people’s backs, and use underhanded methods. She tried to think of several scenarios. Somehow, she felt it was unlikely her Prince would die in this war. What could Vrehan do? Send an assassin, or worse, find some way to poison him? Cassandra knew that Dragon Tamers like Kairen were more resistant to poison, but no matter how strong his body was, there was only so much a man could withstand. Cassandra hated not being able to do anything for him.

She suddenly stood up, surprising both women in the room. Kareen sighed.

“We are not done with brunch, dear.”

“I’ve had enough, Lady Kareen, thank you. Do you think you could have something delivered to the front, if I was to give it to you?”

“Of course, dear. What are you thinking about now?”

Cassandra took a deep breath. The idea had just popped up into her head.

“I’ll prepare some first aid kits for the military.”

“First aid kits? For the front? Those men in the Imperial Army aren’t trained to do any medical procedures, dear.”

“It’s fine, they won’t need training, just common sense. If I taught the men in the North Army Camp, I can have those men at the Eastern Front learn too, even without being there.”

Missandra, smiling widely, and got up too, her excitement evident.

“I love that idea, Hinue! I’ll help you!”

“Oh, you young ones are so full of energy,” sighed Kareen. “Anyway, Cassandra, I assigned your servants to work for you before, didn’t I? They have learned how to write and calculate already. Just have those girls come over and help you.”

“Thank you, Lady Kareen. Can I entrust you with the transportation part?”

“Of course, dear. As if this old lady would sit on her arse while my children fight here and there!”

Cassandra smiled. At times like this, Kareen would be even nicer than usual, and hint at treating her and Missandra as her own daughters. The two sisters then left the garden they were eating in, though Dahlia packed up some more food for Cassandra to snack on later, and went to the little room next to Cassandra’s garden, which had pretty much become her office. Behind her, Missandra was excited.

“Do you already know what we will do?”

“We need to list all kinds of injuries, diseases, and other health issues the soldiers in the front could face, how often, and find a way to resolve and treat any of them in a short amount of time.”

“Alright,” said Missandra, grabbing what she needed to write down. “We can start by listing all of the most common diseases in that part of the Empire, common infections,

and also some basic injury treatments they should use. Should we write some sort of instructions down to put in those kits?”

“It’s a battlefield, Missandra, they don’t have time to read, and it may be that some of the soldiers don’t even know how to read. So we need to make it as simple as possible.”

“We can make drawings or use colors. When I worked in brothels, some of the girls weren’t literate, but they knew which medicine to take based on their stamping or colors.”

“Right, we can use that. Do you still remember them? We need to think about how we can pack them in light, easily transportable ways.”

Just like that, both women started working together. Once they were done planning and compiling information, they brought their project to Kareen, who gave her own opinion on it, and called in some of her personal soldiers, military as well, for them to give their input.

Within a week, Cassandra, Missandra, and several more people started working hard on this. Kareen had more than enough money to support their project and ship it to the front in record time. Not only did the young concubine have her hands full with this project, but the whole of the Diamond City became aware of the efforts made at the Diamond Palace, and offered to contribute to show their support to the soldiers in their own ways. An unprecedented event in the Dragon Empire.

It took a couple more weeks for everything to be ready and the first samples to be sent to the frontline. Eventually, Cassandra and Missandra had come up with little boxes in two sizes: one that could fit in a pocket and be carried by any soldier, and a bigger one, for the ones who could store it in their horses’ satchels or inside a chariot. Those medical boxes included medicines, to treat the most common issues a soldier could encounter on the battlefield, from fevers to large injuries, with very little explanation.

According to the Captain of Kareen’s guards, even the dumbest soldier could use it with confidence. The girls had come up with a compartment system and little images engraved in it, so the soldiers could find what they needed in one glance, even if they opened that box for the first time. The longest part had been to find out how to make everything in a tiny size, but Missandra was the one who found a way to make all the medicine into small and colored pills that wouldn’t be crumbled by any rough movements. Cassandra had to come up with the improved medicine, compared to the Empire’s old ones, and Missandra took care of finding out how to fit them inside.

They also included some bandages and little bottles of alcohol to disinfect, making sure the smell was not the kind that would make the men want to drink it.

The Imperial Concubine Kareen was most helpful in gathering the resources for all that. She spared no expenses to have all the bandages, medicines, or plants Cassandra needed be brought to the Diamond Palace. Even paying for the metal the boxes were shaped in, and every worker who participated in their large-scale production.

Soon enough, news came from the Imperial Palace that the Emperor knew of their project and would shoulder all the costs, which made Kareen laugh. She didn't dismiss the chests of gold bars that arrived in her garden the next morning, though, and even sent a personal letter to thank the Emperor. Cassandra could easily picture the old man jumping around upon receiving a letter from the usually cold concubine.

Even after everything was finalized, they didn't stop producing more. The first feedback from the front was very positive, but Cassandra read every letter very carefully to see where and how they could improve the kits. She realized they could even send bigger containers, and the army accountants could spread the contents depending on the situation. However, Missandra, Dahlia, and Kareen all stopped her from working on that new project. Cassandra's pregnancy was starting to make it too difficult for her to keep working like she was.

Hence, Cassandra was almost locked away from the next steps of the boxes' preparations and found herself bored again. While Missandra worked hard in her stead, the sweet Dahlia stayed with her, or more exactly, watched her. Cassandra couldn't complain, however. Her belly was big and hindering her in many ways. She felt tired no matter how long she slept, and her back was aching constantly. Kareen gave her some hot balm to calm her pain, but even if Dahlia massaged her, it would only numb the pain for a short while.

The only thing Cassandra was still authorized to do was taking care of her garden, and keeping her correspondence with her friends from the North. All of them answered her quite fast, and she was happy to get some news from Nebora and the girls, and from the camp. Evin was surprisingly diligent in telling her everything that was going on there, including how the Red Room had evolved. They now had a fully dedicated team taking care of it and applying all the instructions she had left in the letter. He would even include some more questions from them, compiling any issue they encountered for Cassandra to take care of from where she was.

Orwen was now a full-time blacksmith and quite busy, but he never missed a chance to tell Cassandra about whatever happened on his side of the camp. The men there still called her the Lady of the Mountain, as if she had been some royalty by herself,

instead of just the Third Prince's Concubine. He even let her know about how Shareen's command had changed the camp, and how the young Anour was doing under his older sister's harsh training. It looked like the youngest Prince wasn't particularly cut out for the military.

However, no matter how fast they all tried to send their replies to her, it would take ten to twelve days for the letters to be delivered, and that was a long time for Cassandra to wait. She hadn't realized how the dragon flights had modified her perception of distances, but now, it was cruelly showing.

"Lady Kareen, you called for me?" asked Cassandra one morning.

For once, the Imperial Concubine wasn't interested in her brunch. Instead, she was walking in circles in the room, looking very disturbed. That wasn't like her at all, and Cassandra immediately knew something was wrong. Missandra arrived behind her sister, looking as confused as she was. On the side, a soldier was waiting, his head lowered, probably one of her spies. Finally, Kareen sighed.

"There is some bad news from the Imperial Palace. Prince Sephir died."

"What?" exclaimed Cassandra, astonished. "What happened?"

"Nothing is certain at the moment, the Emperor has closed down the Imperial Palace for an investigation."

"That doesn't sound like something they'd do for a natural death," whispered Missandra.

"No, it isn't. Either the Emperor suspects Sephir was murdered, or he wants to be sure he wasn't. Either way, the Emperor will get to the root of it. I have a bad feeling about this."

"Do you think he could really have been...?" asked Cassandra.

Kareen hesitated a second, looking lost deep in her thoughts. She shrugged.

"The timing is really off. Only two Princes are in the Capital at the moment, two are at the front, and the fifth went back to his own Palace days before that. There is no way Opheus has anything to do with it, that little idiot doesn't give a damn about becoming the Emperor. The main suspects would be Vrehan, someone close to him, or one of the other concubines."

“You really think one of the Imperial Concubines could be behind his death?”

“I am not too sure. They might have thought it was a good time to get rid of him, with Kairen, Shareen, and Anour gone. Sephir doesn’t have many allies inside the Imperial Palace. Even Opheus’ mother could have acted without her son’s knowledge, but those are all assumptions. I think Vrehan is preparing something.”

She turned to the soldier who was waiting to the side.

“I want another report as soon as possible about this investigation. And don’t lose Vrehan or his sister for one second!”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The soldier rushed outside. Cassandra already knew Kareen had an impressive network of spies, but she truly had no idea how it worked, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to know either. Kareen had probably dirtied her hands several times to protect herself and her children, and if she didn’t talk about it with Cassandra, it meant she had no intention to.

“Anyway,” sighed the Imperial Concubine. “We will know more about this soon. The Imperial Palace will have to make an official statement. This is truly too sad. Sephir wouldn’t have become an Emperor, but he was a smart and gentle boy. His mother would have been... Oh, poor Saphia.”

“You knew his mother personally?” asked Cassandra.

“She and I got pregnant around the same time, and we both lost children. She was gentler than me, and way too nice. She died in childbirth, sadly.”

Cassandra immediately thought about her own baby. She couldn’t imagine her child growing up without her around. She had seen it many times, though. The streets of the Capital were filled with orphan children, too young to fend for themselves, resorting to beggary or slavery to survive. Cassandra was well aware that even if no one attempted to kill her, she could die from childbirth, or natural causes. She only hoped that if anything happened, Kairen and his family would take care of her son.

“Have you heard anything from the concubines, Hinue?” asked Missandra. “Didn’t you exchange letters with them lately?”

Cassandra nodded.

“The last letter I received was already two weeks ago, but the concubines were saying Prince Sephir was well. My remedies were helping with his Dust Disease, there was nothing alarming about his current state. Maybe something happened since, or he had a bad flare up.”

“Or maybe someone pulled some dirty strings,” said Kareen. “Anyway, there is no use thinking too much about it, it’s all happening in the Capital for now. Let’s see in the upcoming weeks what becomes of it. However, be careful, dear. My spy also told me Phetra was getting back on her feet, and able to walk already.”

“What! Already?” exclaimed Missandra, shocked.

“She is of dragon blood, just like Shareen. It’s not that surprising that she can heal fast. It would have been more of a fuss for Kairen to throw her out the window if she’d died!”

Cassandra didn’t know if she should be happy or sad about this. She certainly didn’t like the idea of Phetra getting back to her old self. The Princess was definitely waiting to pay them back for what Kairen had done to her. She may be healed, but this kind of pain wouldn’t go away so easily.

The young concubine sighed, and after breakfast was promptly eaten, she went back to her room. She needed to be alone for a while, and write to her Prince. She had no idea if Kairen received her letters at the front. She hadn’t gotten any answer from all the letters she had sent, but she was hoping he was only too busy to answer. No matter if the Prince received them or not, those letters had become her personal therapy. Writing to Kairen every day, to let him know about what she had done that day, how she felt, how their baby and the dragon egg were growing, about her project of the medicinal box, they all made her feel so much better. It was her only getaway from the Diamond Palace. Anytime Cassandra tried to imagine what her Prince could be doing at that moment, she imagined him on a throne, like the one in his tent in the North Camp, talking military strategies with some old General. She could only pray that he was doing fine, safe, and unharmed, and winning this battle bit by bit.

The news received by Lady Kareen was all leaning that way, too. The Eastern Army was slowly losing ground to the War God’s men, and his fierce dragon. Cassandra even heard about it when she’d go to the markets in the Diamond City. The locals all knew who she was and admired her a lot. Cassandra never went alone, and was always in a pink dress, but the merchants liked her very much. They were impressed to see a young concubine so graceful, gentle, and nice to the ordinary people, and would give her some extras at any given chance. Somehow, they had heard about her

doings in the North Army Camp, too, and her Lady of the Mountain nickname was now used here as well.

Just like that, Cassandra was building her own reputation around the Diamond City and she was told some rumors of how the war was going. Some merchants would congratulate her when it was known that the War God had freed another City. Some of the women would tell her to take care of herself and her baby, for when her beloved would come back. Truth was, under Kareen's impulse, the baby's room was already finished and full. The Imperial Concubine was eager for her first grandchild to be born and was overdoing it a bit, in Cassandra's opinion. First, the nursery was way too big, and full of toys for both the baby and the young dragon. It was almost ridiculous. Second, there were no less than three maids already hired to take care of her son, no matter how many times Cassandra argued that she wanted to take care of her son by herself, with maybe Dahlia's help from time to time.

However, as the weeks passed, Cassandra was slowly getting used to the idea that Kaien wouldn't be able to keep his promise. The war would still be raging when her baby would come into this world.