

Chapter 19

The large, Black Dragon growled furiously, its claws ripping the soil and killing several soldiers, grasped or crushed underneath. The beast was roaming furiously among the ranks of the enemy, dispersing them. The soldiers of the Eastern Republic kept spreading around it to try and attack. They would do anything they could to get to the black scales, but it was an impenetrable armor. No blades or arrows could pierce the thick-skinned creature. The only thing that worked was the catapults. The heavy rocks thrown at the black dragon would be like stones annoying it, pissing it off even more. The Dragon would focus on destroying those annoying machines, then move on to the next group of soldiers it could find. It was impractical for such a large-sized creature to be fighting in a City.

Krai was left to unleash its fury at the border, using claws and fangs to tear the enemy apart, and its growl to terrorize the enemy. The border to the City of Dagaria had been the theater of this war for three days now.

The War God's arrival had been a huge relief to the Dragon Empire's people. His accomplishments preceded the man. Not only were all the citizens well aware of his past accomplishments, but for several weeks, the Empire's favorite Prince had been freeing one City after another. The Eastern Army had made great progress long before the news reached the Capital. The lack of communication to the Imperial Palace had been a fatal flaw that had given them a considerable advantage. The Eastern Army had taken several cities by surprise. Acting under the cover of night, they knew exactly where to strike; getting rid of officials and messengers, thanks to the secret information they had obtained, and they had secured their new locations one after another. It had been almost too easy for the Army.

This attack had been carefully prepared. After years and years of feeding their hatred against the barbaric Dragon Empire, the Eastern soldiers were almost too eager when the order had finally been given. Following the Commander's plan to the letter, they had made tremendous progress, one city after another. The hired mercenaries and assassins raided the cities, getting rid of the people in charge, and the soldiers arrived next to definitely capture the city or village. It was almost too easy. The army posted there had shown close to no resistance, completely taken by surprise. All the men were captured, some tortured publicly to scare the locals. Women and children who didn't resist were captured and sent to the Eastern Republic to work as prisoners.

The news of the Dragon Empire's War God's arrival had changed things. The Eastern Army had stopped their progression right away, and instead, focused on taking full control of all of the acquired cities, gathering the men, equipment, and resources to stage a siege. They already knew the War God's Dragon wouldn't fire inside of a City, so they thought they could resist the Imperial Army's arrival.

They were wrong. The War God was not someone they should have underestimated, especially not when he was guiding the Dragon Empire's most powerful army. The first City where the two armies had met was the least consolidated, yet the Eastern Army had spent time getting ready for this confrontation. They had barricaded all doors, gathered the men inside the walls, and got ready to aim at the War God mostly.

They had been defeated in two days. The men were already scared from hearing of the War God's arrival, with his terrifying Dragon, but seeing this man in person had been a terrible experience. He had arrived on foot, and upon facing the door that kept him out of the City, he hadn't stopped. They had tried everything. Arrows, blades, even little fireballs. Nothing had stopped him. At best, they had scratched him, only to watch the scar turn black from afar. Someone had screamed he was a scaled beast, but they weren't sure. The real nightmare had occurred when the War God had used his bare hands to tear the door down. That's right, the heavily barricaded door hadn't stood more than ten, long, painful minutes. That human monster had torn the thick wood apart like one would rip a paper sheet. Many men had been absolutely terrorized by those hands' power.

A dragon's strength could be understood by its size, and species. This man, however, didn't belong to the human realm. There was no other explanation but that Prince being a Demi-God. The Eastern Army had understood for the first time the heavy reality of a man nicknamed the War God by its own people. As soon as Kairen was in sight, their fate was sealed.

The Eastern Army would not give up on their position easily, but the mere sight of the black armor of the War God was enough to petrify a lot of men. His dark eyes showed no mercy to his enemies. The men were falling one after another, killed like fleas in his path. One single man was leading the Dragon Empire Army with so much assurance that it took a lot of resolve for the Eastern Army leaders to not surrender. They had orders coming from their own Capital, but the politicians had no front seat for this massacre!

The only thing saving them was the time they had won ahead. Being able to secure their positions in the Dragon Empire's own City guaranteed a bit of restraint from the enemy soldiers. They didn't want to destroy the houses or harm the locals, unlike the Eastern soldiers who didn't care at all. Even the War God, known to be the most

merciless, wouldn't harm any woman or child that got in his way. That was surprising, considering the extreme violence that man displayed to get rid of his enemies.

Kairen was enraged by this war. It was taking too long. He knew the fault didn't reside in the Generals accompanying him or his men. All the military officers agreed that the late start in this war put them at a major disadvantage. Freeing a city was much more complicated than fighting an army on a proper battlefield. The fights were taking place all over the City, and their population was caught in it, often used as hostages as well. It wasn't a situation that could be resolved by brute force alone.

The Generals were doing their best, but it took time to solve each conflict. Anywhere the War God went, things were settled quickly. However, there was only one War God of the Dragon Empire, and the man couldn't be everywhere. The days were inevitably long, and the longer the war went on, the more the men were exhausted.

Though the War God's presence was the main source of comfort for the Imperial Army, who knew they wouldn't lose this battle with such a Commander, the biggest relief came from elsewhere.

Several weeks after the beginning of the war, messengers came from the back of the Army to let the Generals know the Lady of the Mountain and the Diamond Lady were sending medical supplies. The officials were astonished. Since when did women bother about matters of war? However, when the promised medical kits had arrived a few days later, they were speechless. Everything sent was ready to use, and practical. The Generals were totally baffled, except for one of them, who had been dispatched from the North. That old general knew the Lady of the Mountain, the War God's Favorite, the only lady who cared enough about this war to fight with them.

There wasn't much to argue about anyway. Those medical kits had come at a good time to raise the morale of the troops, and the Lady of the Mountain wasn't only a high-ranked Concubine, she was named Imperial Physician by the Emperor himself. It was enough for all the supplies to be sent everywhere on the battlefield.

Kairen only got to see those kits a couple of days later. The War God had barely rested since the beginning of this war. Returning to a battlefield after such a long time was actually refreshing. Kairen stood at the very front of the battle, slaughtering one man after another, sometimes fighting several at a time. He had gotten a few injuries, but nothing his Dragon Blood couldn't heal. Instead, he was actually frustrated at his dragon, getting impatient outside of the City. Krai was forbidden to fire or enter the Cities, but the dragon was keeping itself busy by clearing the grounds around it. If any

Eastern soldier had a bad idea of trying to run from the City, he was greeted right away by a wide-open mouth, and quick death.

However, this wasn't where both the Dragon and the Prince wanted to be at this moment. They were all longing for a different City, a different company. This fact made Krai irritable, and the Dragon was even harder to keep in check. The Prince was well aware of his conflicted feelings, but there was nothing that could be done about it. His duties came first, and only when this war was over could he go back to his beloved Cassandra.

"What is this?" he asked as one of his soldiers had taken out a little box to try and save his injured peer.

"The medicinal kits from the Diamond Palace, Commander! They were distributed last night to all the men at the front!"

While the man was wrapping an injury, Kairen observed the little box. He recognized the familiar smell of medicine and plants. Cassandra's hair always smelled the same after she had spent time in her garden. A little smile appeared on the War God's face, terrorizing the men around. The War God, smiling? What kind of crazy demon was awake now?

The Commander turned around, swinging his swords with a smirk that wouldn't leave his face. So she had decided to do something, as well. It was so like her to refuse to stay put. A proud feeling spreading in his chest, the War God worked even harder at clearing the City, only resting when he absolutely had to. He even made sure to send some men literally flying, where the dragon could catch them in one bite.

However, it wasn't enough. More precisely, something was wrong about this whole war.

He had felt it since the beginning. The information had come too late to the Palace, and the Eastern Army was well too informed. They had known how and where to strike to get a considerable advantage ahead of them. This was not a simple coincidence. Kairen immediately informed his Generals that he wanted them to capture officials, and make them spill about the rat that had sold the information. He wouldn't let them get away with this.

Finally, in the next City they freed, they captured the right man to interrogate.

Truth was, the poor fellow was about to meet a tragic fate. The War God was annoyed. This war had been going on for several weeks, more than he had promised

already. He wanted to get things done quickly, and this man was the one who was about to receive his anger.

Kairen walked into one of the houses used as a headquarters of the front. Two Generals to the side, one accountant, and two soldiers holding their prisoner on his knees.

“Talk,” said the War God, as cold as ice.

The man may have kept his tongue tied, in other circumstances. If the War God hadn’t been absolutely terrifying, in his black armor and murderous eyes, for example. The man was shivering, already exhausted by the fights, and the struggle he had put into not being captured.

“I know nothing! I...”

One of his legs was loudly broken. The man screamed in pain, but no one else flinched. The men present were all highly trained, and would not offend their Commander with any mistake.

“Last chance,” warned Kairen.

“We... We got the information from here! A messenger arrived with a lot of information! Our King agreed to his terms!”

“Who was that?” Asked Kairen.

“I don’t know! I really don’t know! They only said if we could kill the War God and his army, the new Emperor would give us all the South and North territories, and a hundred chests of gold!”

Kairen glared even more. Some rat had sold out his own Empire for his head.

“Who is that new Emperor they talked about!” roared one of the Generals. “How dare they, when our beloved Imperial Dragon is still healthy as a young dragon!”

“How dare they, indeed,” said Kairen.

The Prince took out his sword, and with one blow, sent the prisoner’s head flying.

“Your Highness! That man might have had more information.”

Kairen didn't answer and left the building without explanation. He didn't care about the prisoner. He already knew this rat would have been way too smart to leave any information behind. The faster way was to send word to his father, and end things quickly here.

He looked down at all the blood dripping off his armor. The black metal had turned a reddish, horrid color over the last few days. Kairen didn't even have time to wash it. He looked around him. The fight was dying. The remaining Eastern Army soldiers were all killed or taken as prisoners by his men.

To his surprise, the city people had even helped a bit, providing food and shelter to the soldiers who needed it. This was a first for the Imperial Army. Aside from the Capital, most cities were terrified by the Emperor's Army. They had never seen the Imperial Military, aside from their own City militia, and the rumors about the Imperial Family held everyone in fear. However, Kairen himself had been surprised to see how things had changed lately. First, the news of him freeing the previous City was enough to have the War God's arrival celebrated whenever they reached another one. Plus, he didn't know how, but the people already knew that, unlike the Eastern Army who did not care, the War God forbade his men from assaulting or injuring any women or children. That was enough to have all the locals support the Imperial Army anywhere they showed up.

Cassandra's shadow was also everywhere. Not only were the soldiers delighted by the medical kits that had already saved many lives, but the story of a former slave turned Concubine and an Imperial Physician was running like a legend in the streets. As soon as they saw the medical kits, the common people treated it like a treasure, looking incredibly grateful when the soldiers used it on the innocent people who had been injured.

Strangely, Kairen was feeling incredibly proud of his Concubine's doings. It was as if Cassandra was there on the battlefield, supporting him with her own strength.

As he walked back to the little building where his army had established themselves during this battle, he witnessed more soldiers using the little kits, now perfectly familiar with all the contents. He had even seen some of his men discussing with the accountants and the men watching the supplies about what they were running out of the fastest, and using the empty compartments to store food.

"Are you alright, Your Highness?" asked one of the Generals as Kairen walked in the building.

Of course, he was alright. He didn't bother to answer and instead, took off his bloodied armor. His bare torso was perfectly fine except for a couple of scratches. Kairen walked upstairs, finding the little room they had prepared quickly for him. The War God could only afford to take short naps, but this was plenty enough for him. He laid on the bed, but instead of trying to sleep, his hand reached for the little box on the bedside table.

Kairen had kept one of those for himself. He probably wouldn't ever need what was inside, but having one of those boxes was meaningful enough for him. He opened it. The supplies hadn't moved, but on top of the compartments, he grabbed the letter he had already read many, many times. Cassandra's handwriting was pretty and delicate. As he was re-reading, he touched her hair tied with his. He could easily imagine her gentle voice saying each word. The War God sighed, imagining his Concubine as she wrote every line, thinking of him. He could fight a hundred wars, but he never would have imagined that being away from her for so long would be so hard. Back at the North Army Camp, he could see her at the end of the day, so he hadn't really stopped to think about even missing her.

Now, this war was getting too annoyingly long, and Cassandra wasn't anywhere near. It was better this way. He didn't want to see the fear he witnessed in the innocent villager women's eyes everyday, in her beautiful emerald-colored irises. She was so sick just from the smell of blood. This place would have been an utter nightmare for her.

He tried sleeping for a bit, just a couple of hours. He had done most of the job in fighting off the Eastern Army, his generals were competent enough to finish whatever was left in his absence. Most of them were smart enough not to disturb the War God's few hours of rest.

When Kairen got up, a full plate of food was ready for him. He ate while listening to several reports, but all in all, this City was now free, and they should move on to the next one. Finally. They were about to reach the last City the Eastern Army had been able to establish a decent siege on. The final fight would occur soon, and then, he was free to go back to his Concubine. Kairen left the building once he was satiated, and his men were done talking. He went outside to join Krai, who was laying in the middle of an abandoned garden of a wealthy villa. That was one of the only spots large enough for the Dragon to sit comfortably, as most of the City had been ravaged by the attacks.

The large black dragon was obviously bored by this war. The Eastern Army had done great by locking themselves inside the City, where it was hard for him to access the narrow streets, and unless Kairen and his men pushed them outside or in areas he could reach, the big dragon literally didn't have much to put its fangs or claws in.

Hence, Krai was looking even more depressed and ignored the Prince walking its way.

“Stop sulking, we’re almost done.”

The answer came as an angry growl. Krai turned its head away, and kept growling, terrorizing the poor soldiers who just happened to be walking by. Kairen sighed and leaned against its big body. Both turned their heads in the same direction, where the Diamond Palace stood, miles and miles away. Kairen promised himself to fly there the minute he would be done with this war. He had already had enough.

Suddenly, Krai moved, pushing the War God and hiding its head under its black wing. Kairen glared at his wilful beast that was now showing him its rear.

“I miss them too, you know.”

Another pissed growl came. Kairen couldn’t blame him. They were both dying to fly back and meet their babies. His son and the Baby Dragon. Kairen had a feeling that the birth had already happened, from the way Krai was acting. His dragon had acted all agitated, two nights ago, but they were right in the middle of the raging battle. However, his angry dragon’s attitude had been even worse since then, and now, Kairen could tell the dragon wasn’t only just missing Cassandra.

The War God had enough. After a few more minutes, he angrily walked back to the main building, yelling for the generals to gather. All men assembled in less than a minute.

“We are attacking the next City in two days at dawn,” he said. “Warn all the men we are taking no prisoners.”

No one dared to protest or even raise a single concern. Two days would be plenty enough for the men to rest, and the next City could be reached in two hours by foot. One would have been crazy to object to the War God when he had this murderous glare on. He was merciless with his enemies, but his men knew Kairen could be as deadly with anyone who disrespected him, too.

Hence, just as the War God had ordered, the Army arrived at the next City exactly before dawn, two days later. Just like the Black Dragon flying above them, the soldiers were actually quite excited. This was the last battle, and victory after victory, they had gotten to the last City needing to be freed. Even if this one would be just as heavily consolidated, the mere thought of ending this war soon was enough to

energize the troops. Just like Kairen, many of these men had families or lovers they were all dying to return to.

As Kairen stood forward, lines and lines of soldiers behind him, an Eastern soldier, probably some general, appeared on top of one of the City's walls.

"Imperial Army! You have fought brilliantly until now, but we won't let you win this City! Our great Eastern Republic won't submit to some barbarian country who..."

"Shut the fuck up."

The man stopped talking, shocked by the War God's words. Kairen hadn't yelled, but his voice was powerful enough to be heard all around. Some men snickered behind him, making fun of the poor soldier.

"We... We are not going to s-step down in front of the tyranny, and..."

"I said, shut the fuck up."

Some of the men behind Kairen laughed at the man's baffled expression, but the War God wasn't laughing. Instead, his glare was absolutely terrifying. The poor spokesperson tried to stutter something, but it came more as some pitiful squeak than any word. It was indeed hard to dare open his mouth when being glared at by the most terrifying black eyes in the world. The most spine-chilling beast wasn't in the sky.

"W... We... d... don't..."

Kairen quietly took out his sword, and in a silent deadly movement, sent it flying. The distance should have been hard to conquer, even for an arrow. However, the blade went right into that man's head, perfectly in the middle. He fell backward and out of sight.

The large door stood in front of them, surely barricaded, but this was the twelfth door they were facing in those few weeks. The soldiers knew exactly what to expect. Kairen glanced up, waiting. The dragon kept circling lazily until the War God clicked his tongue.

"The sooner we're done, the sooner we go back," he muttered, still glaring at his dragon.

Just then, Krai finally flew down, apparently headed right into the door, but a few meters before, finally spit its fire. The door melted in seconds against the pressure of

the heat. Even the men started sweating under their armors, but they watched the door disappear and got ready to fight.

“All men, ready!” yelled the Generals in unison.

Kairen took out his second sword, and with one swing of his hand, all the soldiers started moving at the exact same moment. The Imperial Army was perfectly trained to do what they had to. The Generals alone were enough to guide the men, while Kairen marched in front. Anyone who got in his way wearing the wrong armor was killed instantly. Many men tried to fight him, as it would be the ultimate honor to be able to kill the Dragon Empire’s War God, but they were greeted with death instead.

He was like a machine. He didn’t stop, didn’t flinch, and kept going with nothing to stop him. Krai, too, was flying over the City, looking for any spot where it could attack and bite a few enemies. The dragon was only too happy to have an opportunity to end this war as soon as possible. It even wandered off to chase some men who were trying to flee the City, as the beast had no pity for deserters.

On the ground, Kairen was leading his men silently. They were barging into a building, making sure the inhabitants were safe and the enemy was killed and moved on to the next one. It was harder to progress because the Eastern Army had no remorse in taking hostages. Somehow, they had to find a way around any situation, but after twelve cities of the same scenario, all of his men were trained to act accordingly.

The War God didn’t even have to yell any orders, the Imperial Army was the best in the Empire. Instead, Kairen focused on the larger buildings, or the houses where many hostages could be held. One was particularly barricaded, and he kicked the doors open. Something felt strange inside that place.

It was... too silent. No one had progressed that far into the City yet, but he was almost surprised no one had raided such a big mansion. Was this a possible trap? That thought wasn’t worrying him one bit. He had faced countless traps and rendered all of them useless. His enemies were smart, but his strength and stamina were hard to overcome. Not only that, but his Dragon Blood made his enemy cry in frustration, for any injury that they barely managed to inflict onto him was absolutely useless.

However, his instincts were telling him something was wrong with this place. The large rooms would have been perfect to store men or weapons, but it seemed empty. The ceiling was strangely high, too, as if one of the floors had been taken out. From the outside, the roof seemed robust, so why...?

The answer came a couple of rooms further in. Kairen's instincts warned him first, and he placed his sword in front of him. Another trap, surely. When he kicked another door open, however. There was quite a surprise behind it.

Two young dragons, facing him with their yellow angry eyes. The two beasts stood still, but they were not restrained in any way. Kairen frowned. The Eastern Army shouldn't have any dragons. Those two were unknown, he had never seen those before. They were young, obviously not adults. He swung his sword around. Finally an interesting battle.

There was no record of a man able to single-handedly kill a dragon. Let alone two dragons. The War God had a smirk on. They had really worked hard at trying to kill him.

One of the dragons suddenly growled, and they both jumped on him. The room was big but just enough for those two to attack. No adult dragon would be able to sneak in there, but those dragons were the size of three or four adult men, not even half of Krai's size. They really had prepared the perfect trap.

Kairen barely dodged one of their claws, and the other dragon furiously growled, jumping next. The War God didn't have time to think. He raised his sword and, at the right moment, stabbed one of their flanks, making the dragon screech in pain. However, right next to him, the other jumped, and tore Kairen's armor off his chest in a loud metallic bang. The pieces of metal fell, with holes from its claws in it. The War God frowned.

He jumped to get on one of the dragon's backs, using it as a stepping stone, and attacked the other, aiming for its jaw this time. He barely missed it, but his sword still opened a large cut on the beast's neck. Both dragons were now injured and furious, and they attacked back. The War God felt a sharp pain, and saw his blood flowing from the injury. He glanced down. How long had it been since he had seen the color of his own blood? The injury was large, and strangely, at that moment he was reminded of Cassandra. Something about the pain, maybe. He looked up, and both dragons got ready to jump again.

As soon as the Green Dragon landed, three people dismounted. Princess Shareen led the way, furiously charging inside the Diamond Palace and ignoring all the servants that had run out to greet them. After receiving the infuriating news at the Onyx Castle, she was seriously hoping that there was some sort of mistake.

“Mother? Mother!”

The Diamond Palace was awfully quiet, more so than usual. She had noticed little groups of soldiers stationed around the Diamond City on her flight there, but they were in such small numbers that it didn't seem important. However, now that she was actually inside the Diamond Palace, Shareen felt restless. What the hell was going on here? She had only been absent for a few weeks! The journey to the North Camp was almost like a holiday trip for her. After she was done getting Kairen's men back to work and up to her standards, Shareen had been almost bored. Truth was, Kairen's army was well trained - enough to be able to function perfectly well with or without their Commander present. There had been a few attacks from the Northern Barbarians, but it wasn't anything they couldn't handle. Shareen herself had taken part a few times, having more fun fighting alongside them rather than leading the men. She participated in a few debriefings, had listened to their reports, and made a few minor changes here and there, but really she was not particularly worried about the Northern Army.

As it had been reported to the Imperial Palace, the Northern Barbarians had been attacking more frequently than usual, but it wasn't as bad as what had been described. She was even shocked at how easy it had been to get rid of them. After a few days on the battlefield, she'd had enough. The General also made sure to have her visit the Mountain Hospital that had been Cassandra's doing. Shareen wasn't too surprised to hear them praising the Lady of the Mountain endlessly, but she was surely impressed with her legacy there. Her protocols would certainly be worth implementing in all the Dragon Empire's armies in the future.

After all of that, Shareen had decided to return to the Onyx Castle. After having spent so much of her time in the Imperial Palace, she found the place to be incredibly boring. The Onyx Castle felt like a forgotten remnant of their Empire, with nothing to do and nothing to see. Sure, she had found a servant who was fun enough to play with for a while, but her mother's letters had put an end to that fun time.

Imperial Concubine Kareen wasn't one to ask for anyone's help, or the type to worry over small things, which is why Shareen had been truly alarmed by her mother's letters. Once she told Anour, her younger brother had become restless too. The last one she read before leaving had been telling her about her mother's spies going missing one by one, and that no more news was coming in from the Eastern Front.

Although Shareen wouldn't have been too worried about Kairen ignoring their mother under normal circumstances, it was highly unlikely that he would ignore his Concubine. Cassandra was quickly approaching her delivery date, and Shareen had witnessed how much Kairen loved her. If he hadn't come back yet, it meant he wasn't

done fighting, and if a war led by her brother, the Empire's War God, still wasn't done, something was indeed wrong.

Hence, Shareen had grabbed Anour and Roun and raced back to the Diamond Palace. She had also decided to bring that uptight old guy with them. The poor Imperial Servant had been left outside to puke after his first flight, but she could worry about him later.

"Mother!"

"Shareen!"

Finally hearing her mother's voice, the Princess let out a long sigh of relief and quickly picked up her pace. The Imperial Concubine was in one of the gardens with her arms crossed tightly over her chest. Sitting like a queen on one of the chairs with a young maid at her feet, she had been still as a stone until her daughter appeared. The little dragon, Srai, was also curled up at her feet, and continuously growling at the unwelcome woman before them.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," growled Shareen, unsheathing her sword.

Of all the people she had not expected to see, Phetra was at the top of that list. However, the Princess was seated in front of Lady Kareen, flanked by no less than six soldiers. She no longer displayed any of the injuries that Shareen fondly remembered and was strutting around in her purple dress like she owned the place. Meanwhile, the Imperial Concubine was flanked by two soldiers and neither of the men belonged to the Diamond Palace's militia either. Shareen immediately recognized the color of Vrehan's militia with their red armor. From an outsider's perspective, it may have seemed like the two women were hanging out in that garden with heavy security, but the atmosphere was as cold as ice. Phetra seemed to be in control, and had an arrogant sneer on her face.

However, as soon as her eyes fell on Shareen, it disappeared in a flash and she turned white, visibly terrified.

"Y... You... What are you doing here?"

"That's my line, you crazy bitch!" retorted Shareen, heading straight in her direction.

"Do not take another step, Princess Shareen," warned one of the soldiers, taking out his sword and walking up to her. "We have orders to..."

Shareen grabbed him by his hair and brutally slammed the man's face against her knee. It probably wouldn't have made such an atrocious sound if she wasn't wearing metal knee pads, but alas... The man fell at her feet, his face completely wrecked. Upon seeing that, all the others remained in a religious silence, not daring to risk the same fate.

"Finally," said Kareen, standing up. "Why did it take you so long to get here?"

"What the fuck is going on, Mother?" asked Shareen, still glaring at a petrified Phetra.

"Can't you tell? I'm a hostage. In my own Palace, too!"

Shareen raised an eyebrow, turning to her mother. There were a lot of adjectives that could be used to describe Lady Kareen, but not something even remotely close to a victim's status - she would never have thought to hear her mother call herself a hostage, actually. That woman was probably the most influential woman in the Empire, if not the most powerful.

However, glancing towards the horrified Phetra, Shareen already had a rough idea of what was going on.

"Where's Cassandra? And the girls?"

Lady Kareen quickly explained everything as Anour arrived in the room just in time to hear it all as well. The Imperial Concubine detailed Vrehan's arrival in her City, and how he had barged into the Diamond Palace with his men and seized control. Kareen had spent several hours that night agonizing over Cassandra's crazy jump down the waterfall, before one of the servants interrupted to let her know of news from some of her people in the Diamond City. Not only did they confirm that the Concubine and her sister were alive and well, but also that she was being hidden by them and was about to give birth. After that, Vrehan had spent two nights and two days in an absolute rage, looking for Cassandra everywhere and sending his men left and right to interrogate the local people to find her. They had found clues indicating that the young Concubine was headed North and, fearing Shareen's arrival, had left in a hurry, leaving only a few of his men and Phetra there.

Shareen and Anour were both in shock over what had happened in such a short time. Not only had there been no news from the Capital or the Eastern Front in weeks, but Vrehan had come to wreak havoc?

"What the hell was Father thinking?" asked Shareen. "He is surely not stupid enough to send Vrehan here!"

“I don’t think so, either” replied her mother, glaring at Phetra. “However, that little rat did come here and claim he was acting on behalf of the Emperor to arrest Cassandra. She had no choice but to flee.”

“Damn it! Do you think Sephir is really dead?”

“It seems so... The official news arrived here early the next day and your father placed the entire Empire in mourning for the First Prince.”

Shareen shook her head. The official news had been validated by the Palace so this couldn’t be Vrehan lying. However, she didn’t believe for one second that Cassandra had anything to do with his murder. She turned to Phetra with rage and determination in her eyes.

“Where is that damn little rat now?”

“He left yesterday. His annoying soldiers searched the entire City to find Cassandra, but they couldn’t. Apparently, his original plan was to lock down my City and use me as a hostage, but when he found out I had already sent a letter to have you come back before he had managed to kill all my couriers, he panicked and left like the coward he is.”

“I see he left some trash behind,” growled Shareen.

Phetra was absolutely frozen, and terrified.

“Oh, the little bitch is supposed to be watching the hostage.” Kareen jested before rolling her eyes. “Needless to say, it has been incredibly boring.”

“Your brother is the most horrendous scum to have ever lived,” Shareen sneered, slowly walking towards Phetra. “Not only does that fucker dare to barge in here, to try and harm my brother’s Concubine while he’s gone, but then you have the fucking audacity to use my mother as a hostage?”

“Don’t touch me!” screeched Phetra, retreating in utter fear.

Even the men who were supposed to guard her stepped back in cowardice as Shareen came closer. No one wanted to be next to have their facial bones violently smashed by the furious Princess’s knee. Phetra was left alone to face her, and she couldn’t even hide her fear.

“Y... You can’t touch me! The Emperor ordered you not to kill me!”

“If I remember it correctly, Father’s exact words were, ‘not while we’re eating’, and ‘not in the middle of the Imperial Chamber’. Too bad for you, this is neither of those times or places,” hissed Shareen, slowly raising her sword.

“Stop! Stop! You can’t kill me! I...I know Vrehan’s secrets! I’ll tell you everything!”

Shareen hesitated, tilting her head. The truth was, she had been dying to get rid of this vermin for a while, and even Kairen’s cruel punishment of her hadn’t been nearly enough in her eyes. It was almost too infuriating to see Phetra already walking again so soon. However, this wasn’t a normal situation.

“Mother, what do you say?”

“I say I want my family back!” yelled the Imperial Concubine, exasperated. “This damn duo of siblings got rid of all of my soldiers and chased Cassandra away while locking me in here. If Cassandra, her sister, and my grandson aren’t all alive, unharmed, and well when we find them, I swear I’m going to peel every layer of that bitch’s skin off and break every single one of her bones myself!”

“Oh, good idea, Mother. We can get started on that right now,” said Shareen with a sadistic smile. “You! Break one of her legs.”

The soldier she had pointed her sword at became livid. Phetra was his Master’s Sister, and when the Second Prince had gone, he told them to protect her or at least make sure she didn’t end up dead. The poor man hesitated for too long - Shareen got rid of him with one swift movement of her sword, making Phetra scream in horror. She then turned to another soldier pleadingly.

“I can do this all day,” she said with a terrifying smile.

“Why are you doing this?” yelled Phetra. “Just do it yourself, you monster!”

Shareen turned to her.

“Oh, I would gladly do that, Phetra, but each one of those men had the fucking balls to hold my mother here and kill her militia. So, now they are either going to learn to obey who rightfully rules this place, or die like Vrehan’s damned dogs.”

Behind her, Kareen smiled, obviously proud of her daughter. Though she wasn’t a fighter, Kareen praised herself for raising her two children well. Phetra looked at the soldiers, realizing what Shareen was doing. This was simple and cruel torture. Vrehan had left those men behind to protect her, not for them to maim her!

“Mother?” asked Shareen after a short silence.

“Yes, Daughter of mine?”

“How tall is the highest tower in the Diamond Palace?”

“About... seven or eight floors, I think.”

“Well, you see Phetra, we do have an option in case all of Vrehan’s men remain stupidly obedient to your scum Brother. I mean, it’s only a few more floors than before, you might die for real this time, or maybe not.”

Phetra was panicked and so scared that she was on the verge of passing out.

“B... Break it!” she screamed at the closest soldier. “Do it! P...Please, hurry!”

Shareen almost let a satisfied smile out watching it. She knew Vrehan had actually done nothing but abandon his sister to her own fate, but she also really didn’t care. Phetra had harmed Cassandra, killed Dahlia, and imprisoned their mother here. Shareen was too enraged to let this go.

The sound of her bone breaking and the scream that followed, resonated for a few seconds. Anour couldn’t watch, it made him a bit uneasy, even though he knew how merciless his family could be. But until now, there hadn’t been many occasions to witness it himself. However, he was also livid about what happened.

“What do you have to say about Vrehan?” he asked, finally stepping forward.

“He... He’s... prepared a trap... for... Kairen,” whimpered Phetra, holding her broken leg.

“What kind of trap?”

“I...I don’t...”

“Damn, you really are useless,” sighed Shareen.

While her daughter was still glaring at Phetra, Kareen stepped forward, grabbed her sword, and without warning, slashed Phetra’s hand. Another scream echoed within the Palace’s walls as the severed hand fell to the ground. The Princess held her bleeding stump, her face white and deformed from the pain.

“Try to heal that,” hissed the Imperial Concubine.

No one else could bear to watch the scene. Dragon Blood could heal a lot of injuries, but it certainly couldn't regrow a limb. The blood continued to flow and Phetra clumsily tried to wrap it in her clothing, desperate. Meanwhile, Kareen handed the weapon back to her daughter so Shareen could carefully clean it.

"That was for slapping Cassandra and killing my servants and my men," said Kareen. "I strongly advise you, never to use your remaining hand like that, or I'll cut it off too. I am not as merciful as my children, and I have no problem killing a bitch like you."

Though she raised an eyebrow at being called merciful, Shareen didn't say anything.

"So you're not going to kill her now?" asked Anour.

"First, she doesn't deserve a quick death," replied Shareen. "Second, she'll still be useful until I can get my hands on Vrehan. The bitch probably knows more than she lets on."

"How will we find Cassandra and Missandra now?" he asked. "Is there a chance that they're still within the Diamond City?"

"They couldn't be, Vrehan searched everywhere," replied Kareen with a sigh. "He even tortured some of my people and found the hideout under the waterfall. Thank the Gods, the girls were long gone by then, but they left some fake clues that sent those idiots towards the North. Brilliant girls. But no, from what my people have told me, the girls decided to go to the Capital with the babies."

"By the Great Dragon, I can't believe they're born already. Kairen will go crazy when he gets back!"

"I know, and I haven't even seen them since their birth! I'm going to kill them for making me miss that!" growled Kareen, while glaring at Phetra and her guards.

"Is Brother Kairen going to be okay?" asked Anour, worried.

"I'll go and check on him first," volunteered Shareen. "I don't want to be presumptuous, but that rat is smart, and if he planned a trap for my brother, it's probably pretty serious. Everything about this war sounded off from the start."

"What about the girls? Shouldn't we find them first? If they're going to the Capital by themselves with a baby and a Baby Dragon in tow."

“They don’t have an adult dragon to fly with, it will take them days to get there. They are smart enough to stay out of sight until they reach the Capital, and if those girls are hiding from Vrehan and his Dragon, it will be hard for us or Roun to find them as well. No, I’d better go save my brother’s ass and get him there as soon as possible. Krai should be able to find his baby or Cassandra.”

“I’m worried about your father,” said Kareen. “I don’t think that old man is senile enough to have given that order willingly, not if everything was alright with him. Something must have happened in the Capital, Vrehan would never have dared to act so boldly otherwise.”

“How long will it take you to send new spies to the Capital, Mother?”

“I can send people right away, but it will take longer for them to come back than for you to return from the Eastern Front with Kairen! Also, aren’t you going to help me clean up around here?” Kareen said, while pointing out all of the soldiers who were still waiting by Phetra’s side. The men, suddenly getting nervous about what was going to follow, exchanged glances.

“Seriously, Mother? You want me to take care of them before I go? Don’t we have more urgent matters?”

“I’ve cut enough hands off for today, I’m tired. Plus, are you really going to leave your poor defenseless mother to deal with these men? Do you know how many Vrehan left here? I can’t even walk around or take my brunch quietly!”

“What about recruiting them?”

“Are you kidding me? Vrehan’s army of little mutts? I wouldn’t even allow them to scrape dragon shit off my floors!”

The men were still confused at the situation, and shocked by the women’s words, as Shareen rolled her eyes and took out her sword once again. While Anour sighed and had to look elsewhere, sure enough Roun appeared over the walls, willing to help the Princess do the bloody work.

Between Shareen and Roun, every last one of Vrehan’s soldiers were killed in less than ten minutes, even the ones who desperately tried to escape. He really hadn’t left many behind to protect his sister. After all was said and done, only Phetra was left standing with her half-healed stub, and Roun remained behind in the garden to guard her, even though it seems highly unlikely she’d be able to go anywhere in her current state. She was still white as a sheet, both from the fear and loss of blood.

Then, Shareen accompanied her mother back inside, followed closely by Anour.

“So, Brother really doesn’t know what happened here?”

“How could he? Vrehan killed all of my couriers and spies before I had a chance, not even a fly could have gotten out of this place before today! I bet Krai was able to sense his egg hatching though, he’s always been very sensitive.”

The Imperial Concubine seemed to be back in charge as she was hurrying through her Palace’s halls. Shareen knew her mother well enough to know that, despite Vrehan’s siege, there was no way Kareen had completely run out of resources. The little dragon still followed her closely, as Kareen walked to where a door was hidden, which opened into another secret hideout. Shareen raised an eyebrow. She had spent half of her childhood in this Palace, but there were apparently still many things she had never seen before. Through the hidden door, they climbed some very narrow stairs all the way to the top of a secret tower.

It was a room filled with birds, including a couple of falcons. Kareen whistled, and one of them flew to her wrist. She rolled up a small note she had taken the time to write while Shareen was getting rid of the soldiers and tied it to the bird’s foot. The falcon left the tower with the message, clearly heading towards the Capital.

“Mother, I thought all your spies were dead?”

“Those who were supposed to return! However, I of course do still have many friends in the Palace. That was my fastest bird, we’ll get news quicker this way.”

“I see... Mother, you never told Cassandra about Dahlia being one of your people, did you?”

“She didn’t need to know and now it’s irrelevant... Poor girl. Come on, let’s go back downstairs. I want to get the production of the medical kits back on track to help your brother, and I need to recruit more people as soon as possible.”

“What are you talking about? Medical kits?”

While they walked back down into the Diamond Palace, Kareen quickly explained everything Cassandra and Missandra had been doing to help Kairen’s army while staying here. In a few words, she let her know about the production of medical kits and the feedback they had received from the front before Vrehan’s arrival. Shareen nodded.

“Oh! I was getting fed up with all those officials praising her all the time back at the Northern Camp as if she was some Messiah, and now the girl has done it again. Kairen really knows how to pick them. Does that woman ever stop?”

“As if. But it’s not like everyone can go around playing with a sword to solve their problems!”

Shareen rolled her eyes again, exasperated. Her mother had been very happy to see her and her sword just minutes ago to clear her Palace of all of Vrehan’s men, hadn’t she?!

“Anyway, we still need to figure out where the girls might go once they reach the Capital,” said Kareen. “They probably won’t be able to enter the Imperial Palace without us, and we might not get to the Capital before they do, but we can find ways to help them before that. If only I knew exactly where they would go.”

“Missandra mentioned an... an ex-husband,” said Anour, a little bitter.

“I have one better than that,” said Shareen with a smirk. “I had almost forgotten about the guy before you mentioned the medical kits and all of Cassandra’s doings, but...”

The Princess walked back to the entrance of the castle, where the man she had arrived with was still looking a bit sick. He was standing very straight, and trying to look anywhere but at the bodies Shareen had left behind during her cleaning episode earlier.

Kareen looked at the man, a bit confused. She had never seen him before, but he was obviously dressed as an Imperial Servant and had the demeanor of a man who had been trained for that role as well. He kneeled respectfully as soon as the Imperial Concubine, Princess and Prince were in sight.

“Greetings, Imperial Concubine Kareen.”

“Who is this?”

“Cassie’s former babysitter,” said Shareen.

“My name is Evin, Your Highness. I was indeed Lady Cassandra’s escort and assistant back when she resided in the Northern Camp with his Highness, a few months ago.”

“Oh. Why did you bring the man here then?” asked the Imperial Concubine Kareen, still refusing to acknowledge the servant.

“Tell her.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” said Evin, bowing again. “This humble servant happens to have exchanged a flattering number of letters with Lady Cassandra over the last few weeks. I mentioned our close relationship to her Highness, Princess Shareen, and she politely agreed to bring me here to see the Lady again.”

Kareen exchanged a look with Shareen, but the Princess immediately turned to Evin again.

“You know where Cassie would go in the Capital, don’t you?”

“Yes, Your Highness. In her latest letters, Lady Cassandra happened to mention a residence she had acquired in the Capital recently, thanks to His Highness the Third Prince. As a suggestion to Her Highness Princess Shareen, I strongly believe Lady Cassandra will be very likely to go there first.”

Kareen was baffled for a few seconds.

“A residence? Since when did my son have a residence in the Capital to gift Cassandra? When did he buy it?”

Evin cleared his throat, slightly embarrassed by the next bit of information.

“Well, His Highness didn’t exactly... buy said residence. I would classify this as...forcefully retrieved compensation from Lady Cassandra’s former... owner.”

“Oh, now that makes more sense,” said Shareen, nodding. “Anyway, do you know where that residence is?”

“I do not have an exact address, but I certainly have enough of a description of its facade and neighborhood for someone who knows the Capital City well enough to find out, Your Highness.”

“Good. Go get one of my servants and have them send a courier in my name to the Capital right away. We can’t lose any more time. I’ll make sure our Cassie and her sister get everything they need, and some extra protection too. If Vrehan wants to make another attempt on my beloved grandson’s life, he’s going to have to kill me first!”

Evin bowed once again and left quickly to follow Kareen's orders and send the courier right away, making a clear detour around the bodies still scattered in the Palace garden. Meanwhile, Shareen turned to her mother with suspicious eyes.

"Aren't you going to go there yourself, Mother?" asked Shareen, crossing her arms.

"What are you talking about? I'll go with you and your brother once you've retrieved him from whatever battlefield he is on! Besides, now that Vrehan's little mutts are handled, I need to interrogate his useless sister some more."

"You think you can be more convincing than me?" asked Shareen, placing a hand on her sword.

"Shareen, I am your mother. I was dealing with the Palace's schemes and snakes long before you were born, dear. This isn't my first fight and she isn't the first person I'll be interrogating. If I couldn't make a girl like her talk, I wouldn't be worthy to be called the Emperor's Favorite anymore!"

As Kareen walked back to the garden, Anour grimaced.

"She's really scary sometimes."

"Well, that's my mother. Come on Anour, let's get going before Kairen gets himself killed like an idiot. Mother is capable of burning the Capital down if anything happens to him or her new grandson."