

Chapter 20

The little dragon crouched in the grass, its eyes set on the target. Its long, thin tail waved in the air while its little hips swayed a bit, getting ready to jump, and its little snout twitched as those big, green eyes focused on its prey, waiting for the perfect moment.

Suddenly, the little rodent moved and the dragon pounced on it. The little creature squeaked at the sudden attack, but it was too late. The fierce hunter had caught its prey. The little paws had it trapped and it was watching the rat trying to escape from its grasp with wide-eyed wonder. The Baby Dragon was far too hungry to wait any longer though. It was time to eat! It finished his meal in four bites, licking its chops and paws carefully to make sure nothing was missed. Then, it turned around and trotted back, very pleased with itself. What a fierce hunter it was!

“Kian, did you eat again?” asked Cassandra, seeing the little dragon bounding back to them.

The dragon scampered over to her side, rubbing its head against her hip. Cassandra smiled, caressing the young dragon. She was seated against a tree, busy breastfeeding her son. Just like Kian, Kassian had a ferocious appetite. Both never seemed to have enough. Whenever Cassandra saw Kian walk away to go hunting, she knew her newborn was probably hungry as well. Though it was tough caring for the two of them, there were some advantages as well. The only problem they really had was that a hungry dragon could get very fussy and would bite pretty much anything. While Kian would never hurt Cassandra, Missandra had quickly needed to buy a pair of very thick shoes.

“Hinue, I’m back!”

Missandra appeared between the trees, carrying a bag with some recent purchases. They had agreed that she would need to do the shopping alone, as Cassandra was afraid someone would recognize her in town. Moreover, Kian was never far from her, and the little dragon hadn’t quite grasped the concept of staying hidden.

The younger sister kept a watchful eye on the little dragon’s movements as she approached. Kian had a bad habit of trying to hunt her fingers or toes as a game, but the young dragon hadn’t quite caught on that the playful biting was really quite painful. She had several bandages on her little digits to prove that.

“Kian’s done eating already,” chuckled Cassandra. “They are probably just going to nap next.”

Indeed, Kassian wasn’t really drinking anymore, and his eyes were starting to close. They were still dark, but Cassandra suspected they might lighten a bit as he got older, and she could see hints of green in them.

“Good,” said Missandra. “Because I won’t be able to keep walking much longer if that little guy keeps chewing on my toes.”

Kian’s head raised up, turning to her with knowing eyes as if the dragon could tell what she was talking about.

“Yes, you!”

The Baby Dragon let out a little grumble that resembled a cat’s husky meow more than a scary growl. Missandra shook her head. She actually liked the little, mischievous dragon, if only it would hold back on the biting and chewing on her.

“I still don’t know how Lady Kareen handled two or three of these,” sighed Missandra, opening up her bag.

Despite her complaints, she had of course bought some more dry meat to help fill the little dragon’s stomach. Kian had only begun to hunt recently, and was still perfecting it. From what Cassandra had learned from Lady Kareen, a dragon’s parent would share its food until their baby could hunt well enough on its own. The thought made her feel a bit sad. If only Krai was there, Kian would have learned how to hunt properly by now. And to bite less too!

“Anything new?” asked Cassandra, watching her sister empty the contents of the bag.

“Well, first I’ve got more diapers for the little Prince because I can’t believe how many times a day we have to wash those, and I’ve even started feeling sorry for those poor river fish. Also, more food. Oh, and I found your favorite berries. Some dry meat for the little carnivore.”

“Do we still have enough money?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Hinue. I’m making sure we get a good deal on everything. Plus, the stuff we sold was worth a lot. I’ve never carried so much money on myself before, it makes me happy to spend and get rid of some of it. We’ll definitely have enough until we reach the Capital, especially if we keep going at this rate.”

Cassandra nodded. The girls had left the Diamond Palace almost a week ago now, and they were finally close to the Capital, despite having walked slower than anticipated. It was mostly her fault, though. Even if Missandra helped her carry Kassian, Cassandra was exhausted after giving birth and she couldn't move as fast as she had hoped during those first few days. Moreover, there had been news of soldiers looking for her much sooner than she had counted on. Vrehan had left some of his soldiers in two of the towns he had come through before the Diamond Palace, but thankfully, no one seemed to recognize Missandra. However, this forced them to walk even further away from the towns, and though they tried to see as few as possible, pausing for each of Missandra's supplies runs was just adding further delays to their trip.

"Plus, your little sister is really good at getting discounts," Missandra added with a wink.

Cassandra sighed. The truth was, Missandra was very pretty and she was very good at using her charms, but she still couldn't help but worry about her methods used to get discounts. She knew there was nothing wrong with flirting with the merchants a little, but she was afraid she'd overdo it and have to fend off one of those men by herself.

"Don't get into trouble, Mie..."

"Don't worry, I can handle myself. I'm used to it, remember? Plus, those townsfolk are nothing close to the Imperial Family, I can defend myself just fine. Anyway, it's their mistake for being morons."

Suddenly, Kian's tail started wagging again, its eyes riveted on Missandra's bag. She noticed and sighed.

"Well, he definitely smelled the dry meat. Damn it, I thought I had wrapped it up enough this time! He's worse than a dog, and he's not even tamed yet"

"He's a Baby Dragon," chuckled Cassandra. "I don't think there's any way to tame him."

She put her hand on Kian's back, scratching those silver scales to distract and prevent the little dragon from pouncing on the bag.

"Well, at least he knows how to listen to his mother. Also, Hinue...I heard some weird stuff while I was in town."

Cassandra frowned. Missandra's expression looked somber. What had happened? Could it be about Vrehan? Or the Emperor? Getting news as they travelled through

the forest, while avoiding main roads, made getting information much harder even though they tried to ask at each town Missandra stopped in - they just hadn't heard much. The information wasn't travelling into the little towns as fast as it did between the bigger cities, and most townsfolk didn't pay much attention to the news from the Capital either, unless it involved their taxes.

Missandra sat in front of her, her face a bit scrunched, as Cassandra laid Kassian down and put her top back on.

"Some guy at one of the stands was saying that the Capital is getting ready to crown a new Emperor. They said the old one is dying."

Cassandra's heart sank. Dying? The Old Emperor? Kairen's father? What had happened? This was worse than bad news. She had been hoping that the Emperor would grant her refuge inside the castle and protect her from Vrehan, but now, if he was dying? Cassandra bit her lip, unsure of her next steps now and heavy with worry.

"Did they say anything else?" she asked.

"Not really. The guy at the shop heard it from his brother's wife, who heard it from her cousin who knew a soldier's sister, blah blah blah, and so on. You know, the modern way of getting information around here. I don't really know if it's reliable, but it sure sounds fishy."

"It really does," whispered Cassandra.

This was too much to just be gossip. The Emperor was perfectly fine and healthy a few weeks ago, so what could have happened since then? Cassandra couldn't believe this was only some coincidence. Kairen being sent to the battlefield, the First Prince Sephir's unexpected death. This was too much all at once, and a bit too convenient for the Second Prince.

Missandra bit at her fingernail, looking worried as well.

"Are you sure we should keep heading to the Capital? If something really did happen to the Emperor, it changes things, right? You wouldn't be protected at all."

Cassandra was trying hard to decide on which way to go. Indeed, if anything had happened to the Emperor, the Imperial Palace wouldn't be safe for her anymore. She wasn't sure Kairen would get there before she did, and if she arrived just as the Palace had a new owner, she might not survive this time. Cassandra wasn't losing sight of the fact that the Second Prince also had a dragon; his dragon was the third largest in the

Empire, after Glahad and Krai. She had escaped him once, but Cassandra wasn't in any hurry to face them again. Her injury from it was carefully wrapped in some bandages, but she wouldn't forget about the pain of it so soon.

"Hinue?" Missandra called out to her gently.

"Let's keep going. For now, we don't have anything confirmed. As you said, those may only be rumors. We can always confirm them once we reach the Capital without going to the Imperial Palace directly."

Missandra frowned, unsure about the plan. She wasn't fond of the idea of going back to the Capital to begin with, but now, this could be more deadly than they had originally thought. She was going to go along with her older sister's decisions in any case, but she couldn't shake the feeling that everything was not going to be as Cassandra hoped.

"The Emperor is definitely still alive," said Cassandra.

"How do you know?"

"Lady Kareen. When Vrehan arrived in the Diamond Palace to kidnap me, she confronted him, and he couldn't seem to answer. If the Emperor was in fact dead, he definitely wouldn't have let her talk to him the way she did. So, Lady Kareen is still the Emperor's favorite Concubine, and thus untouchable. The Second Prince hates her just as much, if not more, than he hates Kairen and Shareen."

"Oh..."

Missandra realized Cassandra was right. It all made sense. But for how much longer would that still be valid? The rumors said that the Emperor was dying, not dead. Which meant that if they were right, this was now going to be a race against the clock.

"Have you heard anything about the war?" Cassandra inquired.

She shook her head.

"No. Which means it's still going on," sighed Missandra

Cassandra nodded with a somber expression. No matter how isolated the little towns were, news of a victory would travel the fastest, most notably because people would spot the Black Dragon in the sky. Plus, if Kairen was searching for her, he would have been to both the Diamond Palace and the Imperial Palace by now, which made

Cassandra think something bad had happened. Shareen had hinted that this should be a quick win, but it seemed as if the Princess had been wrong.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure he’s fine,” said Missandra. “Whatever the Eastern Army has going on, Kairen is the War God and the best fighter in the Empire.”

Cassandra smiled gently.

“Lady Kareen mentioned this war was probably not a coincidence either. With Prince Vrehan’s arrival at the Diamond Palace after Prince Sephir’s death, too.”

“That rat face is definitely pulling the strings,” Missandra interrupted. “I bet his whole plan was to get Kairen far enough away from the Imperial Palace for as long as he could. That way, he could eliminate the competition as quickly as possible, and make his moves quietly..”

“I don’t understand. Even if Sephir and the Emperor died, and Vrehan is named Emperor, Kairen could still return at any time,” whispered Cassandra. “What is he thinking?”

“Cassandra, your Prince is with the Imperial Army. No matter who the Emperor is, they’ll act as he says. Now, imagine you have an evil mind and crazy ambition for a second. I mean, if I were Vrehan, I would try to get rid of all my enemies at once; send the most threatening one to a far-away battlefield to be killed, or at least kept busy, so I could get rid of the other obstacles - my eldest brother, and the Emperor with a shiny dragon. That way, even if the War God isn’t killed in battle, I would now be the one who could give orders to have the Imperial Army kill him.”

Cassandra sighed.

“Sometimes you’re awfully devious, Mie.”

“Try growing up in a brothel,” scoffed her sister. “You have no idea how petty and wicked people can be in there.”

Cassandra tried to imagine other scenarios, but actually, her sister’s logic was pretty sound. The only thing that didn’t make sense was the timing - it all felt awfully rushed. She couldn’t see Vrehan as a man capable of putting such a risky plan into action. As she shared her doubts with Missandra, the younger sister thought out loud.

“Well, you know, there might have been a little detail that forced him to rush things.”

Without saying anything else, Missandra nodded towards Kassian.

Cassandra and her sister exchanged worried glances. For a while now, they had been among a massive crowd of people, looking at the long, long line that was waiting to enter the Capital. Dozens of people of all ages were waiting to get in, a lot of them annoyed by the draconian security checks. About ten guards were manning the front, checking all the men, women, and even the children.

The sisters, both hidden in the crowd, were strategizing how they were going to be able to get in, and how risky this could be. The soldiers were scrutinizing every person, not even letting a toddler get through without scanning them over. Cassandra and Missandra had covered themselves under newly bought shawls and were trying to avoid any suspicion. There were actually quite a few habitations and shops outside the walls, so the crowd wasn't that surprising, and they could easily blend in like trees in a forest. Kassian was asleep, strapped to Cassandra's back, but Kian kept popping its head out of Missandra's bag, and thinking she was playing, the young dragon kept trying to bite her fingers each time she pushed it back in.

"They're really checking everyone," whispered Missandra. "This is definitely one of the stupid Prince's moves to prevent you or the War God from getting in."

Indeed, this much security at the wall wasn't normal. Usually, people could come and go as they pleased and the guards at the doors only just inspected to verify they weren't carrying weapons illegally, or to check the merchandise. Cassandra bit her lip. She hadn't foreseen such a problem. With their white skin and green eyes, the sisters would be recognized immediately if they tried to go in like this. She couldn't even sneak just Missandra in, as her sister fit most of the description Vrehan would have given out about her!

"Alright, plan B then I guess," sighed Missandra, suddenly opening the little pocket where she kept their money.

"What plan B?" asked Cassandra, surprised.

Missandra counted how much money they had left and nodded.

"We need someone's help to get us in, and I happen to know someone who can help with that, but not unless we give him lots of money, so...I really hope you still have that residence and people who can at least feed us afterward."

Cassandra hesitated for a moment, then suddenly realized what her sister was planning.

“Mie... You’re thinking about the men you owe money to?”

“Yeah. I mean, I owe them a lot, but if your Prince can pay up once this is over, and I tell them they can make even more money if they help us, then they might.”

“Missandra, I’m...not sure those people you owe money to are alive anymore?”

Missandra lifted her focus from the bag, frowning.

“How is that?”

“When we were looking for you, Princess Shareen and I ran into a bunch of bandits...with tattoos. She and Krai kind of killed them all.”

Missandra seemed surprised for a moment before she looked lost in her thoughts, and then turned to Cassandra again.

“How many people do you think they killed?”

“Maybe about... twenty or thirty in total. I’m not sure.”

“Oh, that’s fine then. I pissed off way more people than that.”

Cassandra was speechless! Missandra laughed at her sister’s look of shock as she walked to the closest shop and bought some paper and ink to write a quick note. Then, her younger sister found a boy in the crowd and gave it to him, asking him to deliver it to the Red District in exchange for a bit of gold. The boy nodded and happily took it.

The two sisters watched him walk through the line, but Cassandra was still unsure about this plan.

“Is it fine if he just hands it to anyone in the Red District? Didn’t you have a name or something?”

Missandra smirked.

“I really pissed off a lot of people there.”

Cassandra nodded as she remembered the quite exhaustive list of establishments that kept a bitter memory of her younger sister, having visited each of them and listened to stories of Missandra’s mischief first hand.

“Trust me,” Missandra added. “If we don’t hear anything in the next hour, it only means that the boy kept the gold. But I can always send another one.”

So they waited. To Cassandra’s surprise, the answer wasn’t long to come. The sisters watched as an older woman stormed out through the gate carrying a bag and glaring intensely into the crowd seemingly looking for someone specific. Of course, Missandra was watching the whole scene from afar with a little smile on.

“Not a bad pick, I guess.”

They didn’t approach, instead waiting for the woman to spot them. When she finally spotted Missandra, she barreled their way, looking furious. While Cassandra was worried, Missandra was quietly waiting with a caustic smirk and crossed arms.

The woman was about twice their age and unusually muscular, with short black hair and tattoos on her face. She looked like a demon on a mission as she approached.

“You little bitch! I can’t believe you have the fucking balls to send me this crap!” she yelled, throwing the note at Missandra’s feet.

“Nice to see you again, Verna. I missed you, too.”

“Don’t give me that arrogant crap, Mie. I only came because you owe me some damn money, a fucking lot of it, and you paid that boy three gold coins! Three! Where is my money?!”

The woman reached for Missandra’s bag, but unfortunately for her, it was well guarded. As soon as her hand was within reach of it, Kian furiously tried to bite her, making her scream and quickly retract her hand. Missandra chuckled while the woman stared at the bag, her eyes wide in shock.

“What the fuck was that thing?”

“A personal security system,” Missandra laughed. “Now, before I give you anything, did you bring what I asked for?”

The woman scowled and tossed the bag at the girls.

“I did, you damn little... Yes, I do have it, but I want my money, you little brat!”

Ignoring her for a moment, Missandra crouched down to inspect the contents of the bag as Cassandra frowned behind her. To her surprise, her younger sister pulled out

some little pots filled with what looked like makeup, two large circles of metal, and two white dresses.

“That’s...”

“My plan,” said Missandra with an apologetic smile. “I know it’s probably not a good memory for you, but we’re going to have to disguise ourselves as slaves to get in. The guards won’t spend too much time checking slaves when they’re focusing on looking for a Concubine.”

“A Concubine?” repeated Verna, glancing at Cassandra. “Mie, what the hell have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“Mind your own business, V. But thanks, you did get everything!”

“Hey, I want my money, Mie. Now! Or I’m ratting you two out to the soldiers. I’m not stupid, you know!”

Missandra sighed, took out the little purse, and threw it to her. Verna caught it and started fanatically counting the money. It was a minute, but then her angry expression slowly returned.

“Are you kidding me!? This isn’t even a fifth of what you promised! I knew I couldn’t trust you!”

“Do you think I’m walking around with gold bars in my purse? You’ll get the rest once you get us inside!”

Verna seemed to hesitate for a moment, glancing at Cassandra and Missandra. Her eyes fell on Kassian too, for a couple of minutes. The baby was awake and quietly laying in the fabric tied around his mother, his mouth making a little O. Verna spent a few more seconds observing his features and his mother’s skin tone before her eyes went back to Missandra’s bag with a suspicious frown.

“A Concubine, you said? You’re not going to get me into more trouble, are you?”

“I promise, as soon as we get to my residence safely, I’ll make sure you get the rest of your money,” said Cassandra.

She was desperate, but if the woman didn’t help them now or decided to sell them out to the soldiers, the situation would take a tragic turn. Cassandra only hoped that the people at the residence still had enough money on hand to pay the difference. They

didn't want to lose any more time. If Kassian cried or Kian got impatient, the soldiers could notice them, and then they'd all easily be captured. At least once they were past the gates and inside the Capital they would be safer.

Verna clicked her tongue.

"Fuck you, Mie, you better have my money or I swear I'm exposing you to the first guard I see!"

Missandra nodded and gathered everything inside the bag again. Then she grabbed Cassandra's arm, pulling her sister away from the crowd to a spot under some trees where no one would see or disrupt them.

"So, these people are probably going to be looking for girls matching our physical description. Even if we're disguised as slaves, we still couldn't just walk in. That's why I asked Verna to bring all of this." Missandra motioned over all the little pots of make-up.

"Will this really tan our skin enough to blend in with the locals? Is that even possible?"

"Of course! You have no idea how much make-up the girls inside the brothels used. First, this is to dye our hair black. It's rather quick and they use it all the time. There was an uproar every time someone spotted a white hair. Oh, and this is for naturally tanning the skin. I'm not sure how much it'll work on us but at least we won't look as white. Crap, I hope there's enough. Well, we don't need to be completely coated, as long as we keep our arms covered and are careful about our hands."

Cassandra kept nodding, she was truly impressed. Her sister had really become a master at deceiving people. To even think up such a plan so fast was a little bit scary, but still extremely impressive.

"What about Kian and Kassian? They're going to search our bags, and if they find us with a baby..."

"We can have Verna carry him. She doesn't look anything like you and thankfully, he looks more like his dad."

"Excuse me!" said Verna, looking astonished. "I never agreed to smuggle someone else's brat in!"

“Stop fussing, think about the money,” retorted Missandra, brushing her aside. “The problem is Kian. It’s not going to be that easy to conceal a dragon, he’s already almost too big for the bag and they are definitely going to check it.”

Cassandra glanced at the sky with a little frown on.

“We can try having him fly over the wall. He probably won’t want to follow me through the crowd and might decide to just fly over the wall himself.”

“Yeah. That would work. We just need to make sure the baby flying lizard could be mistaken for a bird. A very big bird, but still, a bird nonetheless.”

The two sisters spent the next hour dying their hair black and covering their skin with the bronzing powder, making sure nothing was too unnatural. They couldn’t hide the color of their eyes, but this was another advantage of posing as slaves; their eyes would be directed at the ground with no one questioning it. It actually didn’t take them as long to cover Kian with dust, making sure the silver scales weren’t shining anymore and covering its tail with leaves to make them look like feathers. The result was quite strange, leaving Verna, who was still speechless about the Baby Dragon in the first place, with a grin.

“You think people will take that for a bird? Are you insane? He would have a better chance of posing as a cat with wings!”

“Oh, shut up,” retorted Missandra. “We’re not taking him to be examined up close, he just needs to fly above us for less than a minute and come back down. No one will give a second glance at a bird and there are several sizable falcons living in the area. We just need the illusion to last for as long as it takes us to cross that border.”

“You’re crazy,” concluded Verna. “A crazy genius, but crazy. I’m still holding you to what you owe me even if this doesn’t work”

“Stop whining. We just need to set you up with Kassian, cross that stupid checkpoint and you’ll get your money.”

Cassandra frowned. Aside from Missandra, she was very reluctant to let another woman carry her child. However, she didn’t have much of a choice right now, and it would only be for a few minutes. The two girls made sure the baby was comfortably secured against Verna, and Cassandra kissed his forehead gently, making sure he wasn’t too perturbed by the new person. He had been carried by Missandra several times before and rarely cried. Kian was usually the one to get fussy.

Cassandra focused on him for the next few minutes while her younger sister checked her hair for her once more and braided it.

“Alright, it doesn’t really suit you, but it should at least deceive the guards unless they are make-up experts, which is highly unlikely.”

“Can we just go already?” Verna huffed.

“Ready, Hinue?”

“Ready,” sighed Cassandra.

The wait in the line was awfully nerve-wracking and there were a lot of people waiting impatiently to get inside the Capital. Cassandra and Missandra did their best to keep their heads low, the younger sister trying her best to mimic her older sister. The big rings of metal around their neck were actually old slavery collars that Verna had retrieved from girls that had bought their freedom. The locks were broken so they could easily be opened, but that wouldn’t be visible to the guards, as they were also wearing shawls and covering their napes with their hair.

Verna was the worst actress of the three. She kept glancing down at Kassian, looking very awkward. The baby didn’t seem to care much about who carried him as his eyes were constantly following his mother. Meanwhile, the one who was supposed to be pretending to be his mother looked like she was horribly embarrassed to be carrying a baby at all. Thankfully, Kian was quietly staying in the forest. Cassandra was worried, though. After several attempts, she thought she managed to lull the Baby Dragon enough to stay put and hopefully take a nap while they made their way inside, but she was still afraid it would come out at any moment and give them away. She was counting on the crowd though - Kian had never been around so many people at once and tended to stay away from strangers. Hopefully, the little dragon would find something in the forest to distract itself with for long enough before she called for it to fly over.

When they were only a few people away from the entrance, both sisters tried to pay extra close attention to the guards. The men were obviously bored with the job and not paying much attention. People were getting angry about the wait and several officials didn’t even hold back and were complaining and scolding them. Therefore, the soldiers were doing their best to check the people quickly and move on to the next one. This was good news for the girls, they probably wouldn’t be checked too long either.

“You, with the baby,” one of them called when Verna stepped forward. “Is that yours?”

“It’s my niece, I’m bringing her back to my brother. His wife couldn’t take it anymore and left him alone with the kid. Can you believe that?”

“What a bitch. Your niece is cute though! My wife just had twins and all they do is cry. You look lucky, she’s quite behaved. Can I see your bag?”

“Sure, here,” she stated as she handed over her bag, “So far so good, but it’s almost her milk time. Gotta get her back to her dad soon.”

“Oh, sure. Wait, are those slaves with you?”

Missandra and Cassandra, kept their heads down and stepped closer to Verna. They could barely breathe, but everything had been going well so far.

“Yeah. Is there something wrong?”

“You have two slaves? You don’t look that wealthy.”

Missandra felt a pearl of sweat glide down her spine. Stupid guard, couldn’t he just mind his own business!

“Hey, I might not have the looks but I work hard. The Red District pays well, hun. I actually got those two from their Masters, and at a good price, too. Just check the bag, you’ll see I have plenty left.”

“Oh, I see. Be careful though, they’re getting stricter on the laws about slaves. Well, those two look pretty fat, probably not too bad, eh?”

Cassandra went red. This was her first time being called fat! She had just given birth, but still! Missandra, making sure to keep her head down, couldn’t keep herself from rolling her eyes - stupid soldier.

“Alright, you’re free to go. Come on people, let’s keep it moving!”

Finally, they made it in, making sure to get away from the crowd as quickly as possible and slide into one of the narrower side streets. Cassandra let out a long sigh of relief.

“I can’t believe that worked.”

“Me neither,” said Verna. “Here, just take back your kid.”

Cassandra happily opened her arms. She was glad to finally have her son back and the baby immediately gripped a strand of her hair. She checked him over, but Kassian really didn’t look upset in any way, his eyes stayed riveted on the strand of black hair with his familiar little frown on.

“Good one, making him pass for a girl,” chuckled Missandra. “Guess you’re smarter than you look.”

Verna glared at her while snatching the bag from her hands, furiously rummaging through its contents.

“Oh, shut up. Now, where the fuck is my money! You better...”

Before Verna could finish her sentence, a sudden ruckus was heard behind them. Cassandra went white. People near the gate were screaming and pointing fingers towards the sky while someone yelled something about a horrible, flying monster. Missandra grimaced.

“I guess the other baby decided not to wait for the cue.”

Sure enough, they soon spotted Kian quickly flying their way. The little flapping wings were causing the fake feathers to fall off and the dust was blowing away with the wind. Not far below the little dragon, the girls could hear soldiers screaming as they tried to follow it. They would have no problem spotting them now!

“Oh, crap!”

Missandra reacted quickly, grabbing her sister’s hand and dragging them down several different streets. Verna didn’t follow, opting to grab their bag and take off in the opposite direction. The two girls didn’t have any time to think about the loss. They started running through various alleys trying to hide from the soldiers. Behind them, Kian thought it was so fun to be flying overhead, but still following closely. Missandra quickly snatched the Baby Dragon from the air. They couldn’t risk it flying above their heads and giving away their position.

Cassandra held Kassian tightly, completely panicked. She had no idea where they were headed as she blindly followed her younger sister, praying they wouldn’t be followed. They ran for a while until Missandra suddenly grabbed Cassandra’s hand and pulled her into a hideout. The door looked locked from the outside but, to those who knew, it only needed a slight push to allow entrance into a small, abandoned

garden. And it was very small indeed as Krai wouldn't have even been able to squeeze its head into it. The sisters scrambled in and Missandra quickly closed the door behind them. With their backs to it now, they tried to quiet their breathing so they could listen for the soldiers' steps - they were already hard enough to hear over the constant yelling of orders. Once they finally heard the footsteps run past the door, both girls finally let out a breath of relief as they held onto the babies.

Kassian was wiggling around in Cassandra's arms looking uncomfortable, probably unhappy about the excitement from earlier. Kian too, didn't like being held. The dragon struggled in Missandra's arms, wagging its tail in protest. Thankfully, she had quickly picked up how to handle the Baby Dragon and kept her hand tight around its snout to avoid getting bitten.

The sisters waited like that for a few more minutes, standing with their backs against the door, holding their breath... They were both terrified. Those men had definitely seen Kian and would probably realize Cassandra was back in the Capital now too. Once it calmed back down outside, Cassandra slid down the door, her bottom hitting the ground with a small thud and releasing a sigh from her lips. She couldn't believe they had really made it in with her sister's crazy plan. She took off the fake collar, tossing it to the side, and rubbed Kassian's little hands to help calm herself.

"I'm exhausted," sighed Missandra. "I hope your people have got some good beds for us."

"Me too. But that woman took our money."

"Verna? No, she didn't. I have it here."

Missandra suddenly pulled out a little purse from under her shawl. Cassandra had lost hers while they were running, but apparently that didn't matter.

Cassandra frowned.

"But she had it when we were checked. How did you...?"

"Funny enough, when she grabbed the bag away from me."

Cassandra sighed.

"Mie..."

“What? We need the money, just in case. Plus, she doesn’t even know where we’re going, so it’s fine.”

Cassandra kept shaking her head. Missandra was truly another level of mischievous. But at least they had some money for now, so they wouldn’t have to worry in case something went wrong at the residence. Cassandra didn’t know what to expect there, but she hoped her friends would be able to help them out. They had been sleeping in the woods for a week now with a baby and a dragon baby and they could really use a good night’s rest.

“How did you know that door wasn’t locked?”

“I know several good hideouts like these throughout the City. It’s kind of useful when you need to run away.”

“Missandra...”

“What? I already told you I pissed off a lot of people!”

“We need to talk about your debts once this is all over,” sighed Cassandra.

Missandra shrugged.

“Anyway... Do you know how far we are from your residence?”

Cassandra took a deep breath as she tried to recall which part of the Capital they were in. It was such a large city and they had run through several streets too. Cassandra wasn’t so familiar with all the districts, but she could remember the way from the gate. Judging by how much they had run earlier, they probably weren’t too far.

“Maybe about ten minutes away.”

“Alright, then let’s wait a bit more to be sure those soldiers are gone and then go.”

Cassandra nodded. She got up and looked around for a water source, as all gardens had one, and went to wash away the tan from her hands and face. With her shawl and their spare clothing gone, there was no point walking around with her hands and face being darker than her arms. She quickly washed all of the dye from her hair as well and Missandra did the same after her. They both still had some black in their hair, but their skin was back to its original porcelain color.

Meanwhile, the young Prince and Dragon had been playing next to them on the shawl Missandra had laid out. The human baby was still too young to move around much,

but he'd grab Kian's tail and hold on despite the young dragon's attempts to shake him off. Cassandra chuckled while catching the scene, and took Kassian in her arms, gently kissing his plump, little cheeks. The baby grabbed at her dress with a pout.

"Alright, let's go," she sighed.

They couldn't put Kian in the bag anymore, as Verna had run away with it. So, Missandra tightly wrapped the little dragon in her shawl, covering its head as much as she could so it would look like it was just an oddly shaped package. Thankfully, it was dusk now and with the sky getting darker, it would hopefully decrease their chances of being spotted. Both sisters carefully stepped out of the hideout.

Missandra walked a bit ahead to check each street first. They were being extremely careful, and luckily didn't run into any soldiers. Following Missandra's instincts, they took the most crowded streets, hiding among the people and acting as if they were just passing through. Cassandra was the most afraid of being spotted. Holding Kassian against her chest, she desperately tried not to look up at the sky. If only the Black Dragon could appear now.

After waiting in a narrow street for a bunch of soldiers doing their patrol to leave, they finally arrived at the street of Cassandra's residence. She was nervous. What if Vrehan knew about this place? What if something had happened while she was away? What if they were locked out, without any help and with only the little bit of money they had left?

Cassandra took a deep breath and knocked on the door while her younger sister kept a lookout, but thankfully, the street was deserted. At first, no one answered. Desperate, she tried again. She hadn't been here in ages.

"This is a private residence!" yelled a voice from behind the door. "State your name and your business!"

Despite the rude answer, Cassandra immediately smiled.

"Yasora! It's me, Cassandra. Open the door please!"

"Don't yell that!" Missandra said, looking worried.

"Oh, by the Gods! Finally!"

The woman opened the door and grabbed Cassandra's wrist, yanking her in. Yasora was wearing a green dress with her hair braided down her back and some streaks of

white showing through. She seemed to have aged a bit, but she still looked much healthier than the last time Cassandra had seen her.

As Missandra and Cassandra walked in, they were surprised to see several lights on in the residence. Yasora wouldn't let go of Cassandra's hand, almost shaking.

"We've been waiting for you two!" the older woman exclaimed, her eyes looking as if she was about to cry. "I was starting to fear something had happened! Now, come on!"

After one last glance around to make sure they hadn't been followed, both sisters were pulled inside, the door closing tightly behind them. Kian, who apparently had enough of being carried by Missandra, let out a little high-pitched chirp as it jumped out of the shawl she had been trying to keep him wrapped in. The Baby Dragon landed on the ground, more of a little tumble than gracefully, but quickly got back on its feet to start sniffing and looking around.

Meanwhile, the exhausted sisters finally let out a long sigh of relief. Cassandra turned to Yasora, confused.

"You were expecting us? Why?"

Next to her, she knew Missandra already had her hand on her little dagger, just in case this turned out to be a trap of some sort. However, it was very unlikely. Officially, there was nothing tying Cassandra to this residence. Kairen had just gotten rid of its owner and freed all the slaves. More than likely, no one had stopped to take care of the paperwork.

With the exception of her tired eyes, the middle-aged servant lady looked the best that Cassandra had ever seen. Yasora took her hand, nodding.

"We've been so worried! Two days ago, out of the blue, a man showed up at the door saying he had come under the orders of Imperial Concubine Kareen! He told us you would likely arrive here soon, with your younger sister and a newborn. He told us to be ready to help you! He said we had to do anything we could to assist you as soon as you arrived, and make sure no one found you. He gave us plenty of money and food to fill our storage cupboard too! Oh, and we also have a letter that came for you, carried by a messenger bird, from an Imperial Servant named Evin."

"Evin!" exclaimed Cassandra, surprised to hear about him.

"Someone you know, Hinue?" asked Missandra, confused.

“Prince Kairen appointed him as my... attendant back when we stayed in the North Camp. He accompanied me everywhere all day, he’s a good man.”

Just then, Kassian started getting agitated in his mother’s arms. A bit unhappy, the baby started moving his closed fists and cried, visibly upset.

“Oh, come in! Let’s take care of you first, you must be exhausted! Don’t worry, we have everything ready!”

Yasora guided them inside the residence. Cassandra had lived several years in this place, and she could see the changes since the last time she had come here. First, the roof that Krai had torn apart had been repaired, though the place seemed to have been renovated as some storage place. Furthermore, leaving all the servants in charge without a direct Master had made the house appear livelier than ever before. Plants were happily growing in the gardens, with some cats playing around. Also, a lot of doors were left open, allowing the young servants to rush from one place to another without worry.

However, as Yasora had promised, everyone had been waiting for them. As soon as they walked in, Cassandra was surrounded by many familiar faces. The young servants and former slaves she had worked with years prior circled around her, greeting her and vocalizing amazement and awe for her baby. However, Kassian wasn’t in the mood for the introductions. The young little Prince continued his crying and fussing until Yasora yelled for the young ones to clear the area and get to work. She was apparently appointed the natural head of the house until Cassandra returned.

First, both girls got to take a bath in one of the large indoor bathtubs of the residence. As if they were some valued guests, the two sisters and Kassian were given complete attention by the servants. After almost a week of surviving in the wilderness, Cassandra and Missandra enjoyed being able to properly relax in some hot water with fancy soaps. They let Kassian play in the water a bit. Just like Kian, they had already noticed that the baby enjoyed water a lot. As soon as he was laid in, he naturally tried to paddle and splash with his feet, wiggling around. Kian was swimming around them in the bathtub too. The dragon’s wings were still not fully developed, but it could make short little flights and jump out of the water before diving again.

Once they were done bathing, the sisters were given some large bathrobes. They noticed someone had even gone to purchase new diapers for the baby. The dragon was a bit harder to persuade out of the bath, though. Cassandra attempted to call Kian out many times, her pleas falling uselessly on deaf ears. Eventually, Missandra had to wrestle the mischievous Baby Dragon out, it was having too much fun making her chase it around, until she was finally able to grab the silver tail.

“Come, while you were bathing we got some dinner ready for you,” said Yasora. “I imagine you have much to tell us!”

Indeed, a large table had been prepared with food, making them immediately hungry despite their current fatigue. Missandra almost jumped to get a steamed bun.

Meanwhile, Cassandra carefully laid Kassian down in a little basket containing a blanket that the young servant girl Mira had prepared for him. As soon as he was on his back, the baby yawned, and Kian jumped next to him to curl up for a nap, too.

“So?” said Yasora. “I’m very confused, Cassandra. Last time we saw you was at the slave market, and after that we barely heard anything.”

“I’m sorry, things got...hectic.”

Cassandra went on to explain everything that had happened to her since the last time she had come here to free the slaves, and Kairen had killed her previous mistress. It was a lot from when she had left the Palace, and Missandra helped her fill some blanks as well. Both sisters were also trying to eat while talking, as the sight of cooked food made them realize just how hungry they really were. With all the stress, Cassandra hadn’t realized how tired she felt, either.

Once she was done, both for explanations and eating, she turned to Yasora, worried.

“What about the letter?”

“Oh, right. Give me a minute.”

She left and came back, handing to Cassandra the letter she had mentioned earlier.

“I didn’t open it, as it was addressed to you. Just like I said, this letter arrived the next morning after that man had come by, delivered by a messenger bird. The previous man warned us we’d better...welcome you properly, and also make sure you stay safe. “

Missandra and Cassandra exchanged a glance.

“Definitely one of Lady Kareen’s spies,” said Missandra.

“Probably,” agreed her older sister, opening the letter right away.

Cassandra read the lines so fast that she had to go over a second time before handing them to Missandra.

In this letter, Evin was true to himself, hoping Cassandra was alright as well as giving her a detailed report on the situation in the Northern Army Camp. He wrote how he had persuaded Shareen to bring him back with her to the Diamond Castle, and described their current situation up to the time he had sent this letter. Which was written and sent in a hurry. She let out a sigh of relief, though she wished it contained some better news.

“So, Lady Shareen is at least back at the Diamond Palace with Prince Anour,” reiterated Missandra.

“However, they still had no news of my Lord when that letter was sent. What is going on?”

Cassandra couldn't hide how worried she was for Kairen.

She was indeed happy about Shareen's return to the Diamond Palace, thankful for Lady Kareen to have an extra ally by her side. The Mother-Daughter duo was so strong, they had actually chased away the Second Prince. She didn't care much about Phetra's fate, but Cassandra was worried to know where that treacherous Brother of hers had gone. Did he follow the fake leads to the North? They hadn't heard anything about the Second Prince's army on the way here, but this could have been because moving his army was a slow process. Maybe he was only a couple of days behind.

Missandra gently put a hand on her older sister's leg, feeling her worry. She then turned to Yasora.

“How is the situation here? We heard some bad rumors about the Emperor on our way here.”

The middle-aged woman sighed and nodded, grabbing one layer of her dress with a sour expression.

“I fear it is all true. The rumors have been all over the streets for a couple of days now. The Old Emperor has become very sick. We don't know what's going on in the Palace, the security was increased so suddenly and there was a big ruckus. They tried to prevent people from coming in or out, which made people even more suspicious. Some Ministers and Scholars were even executed publicly, people are terrified!”

Cassandra was livid. How could so much happen in a single week? Just because Sephir had died. Now, the Emperor was supposedly near death as well... people being executed... that sounded like someone was purging. Her heart sank. What if Kairen

didn't come back in time to stop his brother? She exchanged a look with Missandra. Her younger sister didn't look worried, but angry.

"That rat face probably put his plan in motion as soon as your man was sent to war," Missandra said. "What a snake."

"So no one has been able to enter the Palace since then?" asked Cassandra. "What about the Fourth and Fifth Princes?"

"I haven't heard anything about those two."

Cassandra bit her lower lip. That meant the Fifth Prince Lephys and Fourth Prince Opheus were probably still inside the Imperial Palace. The problem was, she had no idea if they would side with their Second Brother or Kairen. Cassandra had only met the two of them very briefly. Lephys didn't give her a good impression at all, and she couldn't even remember seeing Opheus aside from his presence during the Red Moon Festival. He was known to be very secretive and avoided his father's banquets almost as much as Kairen and Shareen. Could he be a potential ally? She couldn't approach either of them without being sure.

"What about the battlefield?" she asked, her throat a bit tight. "Tell me you have news?"

Yasora seemed to hesitate for a few seconds and nodded.

"I do, but... it is not much better. The last thing we heard came from some soldiers, yesterday. Ethen went to buy some groceries and heard them. Apparently, they said the War God was ambushed in the last city, and the fight isn't going too well. I honestly don't know if that's true, but...the Eastern Empire had dragons."

Cassandra was shocked. Dragons? How could the Eastern Empire have dragons when none of their people had Dragon Blood! Were those dragons captured? Or conveniently given to them by a certain Prince. Cassandra tried to remember.

"Vrehan has two sons, but he wouldn't send his own sons' dragons to war," she muttered.

"Maybe he took some of his brothers?" said Missandra. "Didn't the First Prince have sons, too?"

"Sephir had one son, and other than Vrehan's sons, I think the Fifth Prince Lephys had sons as well... Oh God, the First Prince's Concubines, and their children!"

Cassandra had almost completely forgotten about those two. What had happened to them after Sephir's death? She clearly remembered the two Concubines who had tried to befriend her, back at the Imperial Palace. Kareen had stated those women and their children would be in danger as soon as their Lord died. What had Vrehan done with them, and with the children? Would he use his nephew's dragon?

She remembered those women, Berissa and Chiara, when they had come to her. Cassandra hadn't thought too much about it since then... She hoped they were fine. Did they manage to leave the Imperial Palace? Maybe they were fine for now, as the Old Emperor was still alive.

"I hope they are doing all right... You said the man brought gold and food. Did he say anything else?"

"No. He was very discreet, probably a spy."

It made sense. Cassandra wished Lady Kareen had left more information. At least she had found a way to provide them some assistance.

"Lady Kareen probably didn't want you to move from here until they arrived," said Missandra. "Without the Third Prince, you're a target for them. Especially with those two."

She was pointing at Kassian and Kian, both peacefully sleeping already. Cassandra sighed. The last thing she wanted to do was put her baby and his dragon in any danger. This house was probably safe for now, but the word that she was hiding in the Capital would definitely spread around now that Kian had been spotted at the gate. Now more than ever, she couldn't stop worrying about everything going on. The Concubines and their children, and the Old Emperor... The battlefield, as well. What was that story about dragons! This was supposed to be an easy victory, but now, her dear War God could really be in trouble.

"Shareen will probably go to help him if she's gone back to the Diamond Palace," said Cassandra. "However, I think this sounds too much like a giant trap."

"Definitely," sighed her sister. "I told you from the beginning. What do we do though? We should stay still until they arrive, right?"

Cassandra hesitated a bit. Could she stay put, though? Time was against them. If that letter had arrived two days ago through a bird. If everything Evin had said was right, and Shareen had to go help her brother on the battlefield before they could come back

here, her Prince most likely wouldn't be able to return to the Capital for at least a couple more days. That was only an optimistic estimate, too.

Meanwhile, his father was dying in the Imperial Palace, only a few paces away from Cassandra. She bit her lip, making Missandra frown.

"Oh, no, no, Hinue."

"This might be our only chance to save the Emperor," she said.

"Or our one chance to get killed! Why would you go to the Imperial Palace when that would be the obvious place we could get ourselves killed!"

"The Second Prince isn't in the Capital at the moment, right?" asked Cassandra, turning to Yasora.

"No."

"See? Missandra, if the Emperor dies, we will be in much more trouble than we are now. We are losing time, the Old Emperor could die any minute from whatever they did to him!"

"Yes, and maybe that old man is already dead and done for, Cassandra! In any case, I'm pretty sure Lady Kareen didn't want you to go there and expose yourself! They freaking closed the Imperial Palace for a reason, they don't want you in!"

"Maybe we can find a way around that," whispered Cassandra.

Missandra was about to retort something, but before she did, Yasora raised her hands, putting an end to their dispute.

"Ladies, I think you are both very tired and in need of some decent sleep. So, even if you want to come up with a plan, I suggest you wait until tomorrow."