

Chapter 21

Despite all the worries and thoughts she had, the exhaustion from the journey allowed Cassandra a long, deep sleep. She and Missandra were finally able to sleep in a real bed, after a long bath and a hot meal. It was the first time they didn't get up to tend to the babies since their arrival. Kassian and Kian were carefully watched by Yasora, and the young Mira and Ethen, who made sure the two young babies didn't miss a thing. Cassandra wouldn't have entrusted them to anyone else, but she really needed one night of uninterrupted sleep.

When she woke up the next morning, she felt refreshed and her mind felt clearer. However, Cassandra's desire to help hadn't changed. She was simply determined to convince Missandra to participate. It wasn't just about having her sister agree, Cassandra realized her younger sister's wit may be a life-saving skill. It could be necessary, if she had to infiltrate the heavily guarded Imperial Palace. Missandra had demonstrated that she had her own resources over the past week. The difference in abilities between Cassandra and her sister could be crucial to completing the task at hand.

Hence, when she walked into the little room that had breakfast waiting for them, Cassandra tried to think about how to approach her sister. Carrying Kassian, who was a bit grouchy from having just woken up, she sat next to her.

"Good morning."

"Morning," yawned Missandra, her hair still all over the place.

Somehow, Yasora seemed to have understood that the two sisters would have important topics to discuss. None of the younger servants were around. Everyone that was around them was simply busy with their tasks, not staring or asking any questions. They began eating in silence, only Kian and Kassian making little noises. While the baby was being breastfed, Kian was devouring a full plate of meat buns, apparently a new favorite food.

Cassandra waited a bit before opening her mouth, trying to gauge her sister's mood, but Missandra was being a bit too quiet.

"Missandra..."

"If this is about last night, Hinue, my answer is still no."

Cassandra sighed. She knew how stubborn her sister was. This wasn't going to be an easy one.

"Missandra, we cannot stay passive."

"Yes, we can. We are not going to get ourselves killed by infiltrating a Palace guarded by hundreds of guards under that maniac's control, just to save an old man who, if we're that unlucky, might even be dead already."

"The Emperor isn't dead yet," retorted Cassandra. "Missandra, I cannot stay hidden here while he might be dying. Not when I could possibly save him."

"You don't know if he's really dying, if he's fine, or already dead! You don't know if you'll be able to save him either, Cassandra, and that could actually cost you your life! The only thing we do know for sure right now is that the crazy "I know Kairen is fine," retorted Cassandra, almost angry now.

Missandra shook her head. She didn't like to be scolding her older sister, but she was terrified that Cassandra was about to put herself in danger once more, and she wouldn't be able to stop her. Missandra put down her plate and turned to Cassandra, looking very serious.

"You barely escaped him once, Cassandra," she said. "You barely did. If it wasn't for the Diamond People, or for Lady Kareen buying us some time, we would already be dead, or worse, dead in his Dragon's stomach. This psychopath might even have taken his sweet time and tortured you, just to piss off the War God. In any case, I will not abide by anything that might put you and I anywhere near that guy. Not until we are sure to be safe."

Cassandra sighed. She understood Missandra's reasons and in many ways, her younger sister was actually right. It was a miracle they had been able to travel here to safety and remain unharmed. Cassandra had gotten a new scar on her arm, but it was healed already. Given the circumstances, it wasn't the worst thing that could have happened.

However, something was telling her to go to the Imperial Palace. Not only for the Old Emperor, but she felt like something much bigger was going on, and they had to stop it before it was too late. If her Prince was still caught up in a war, how could she stay here and drink tea?

"Missandra, I can't. I can't stay hidden here. We already did the hardest part, the journey. Our goal was to arrive in the Capital."

“Yes, because we thought the Old Emperor could save us. We had no idea he wasn’t doing well! If we go there, we can’t be sure he will protect you or Kassian!”

“What if he can? What if we can save the Emperor and end this? Missandra, another thing we know almost for sure is that the Second Prince isn’t there, right?”

The younger sister frowned, but before she answered, Yasora cleared her throat.

“Actually, he is not. News came in very early this morning. Two of our people who were in the market said the Second Prince was on his way here, but is still a couple of cities away.”

“See?” said Cassandra. “We will know right away if Prince Vrehan comes here, Missandra, his...”

“He is on his way back!” yelled Missandra, getting on her feet. “Cassandra, this cold-blooded murderer, and his crazy bitch sister might be only a few hours away from here!”

“That is exactly why we have to move now! The longer we hesitate, the more time we will lose! What if this is our chance to beat him, heal the Emperor, and punish Vrehan and Phetra for what they did?”

Missandra stayed silent for a few seconds. This was really too crazy. She was the one trying to hold Cassandra back, and her sister the one who wanted to take action? This was truly too much! This was a life and death kind of decision, and she was scared they were running into a trap.

“What if they expect us? What if we run into a trap? Have you thought about Kassian? And Kian?”

Cassandra looked down at her son and took a deep breath.

“I’m thinking about him. If his Grandfather dies, what do you think will happen? Maybe something will happen to his father, maybe Kairen won’t be able to keep Vrehan from becoming Emperor. I am done letting Kairen fight every battle for me. I am good at one thing, Missandra, that’s healing people. If the Emperor is sick, this is my call. It is up to me to do what I can. I will let Kairen deal with Vrehan, but the Emperor’s health became my responsibility the moment I heard about it. Doing nothing is the worst thing. I’d rather die attempting to do something than stay here and close my eyes, hoping someone else will solve the problem for me.”

Missandra opened her mouth, but she found no words to respond to that. She was annoyed. Annoyed, as her older sister was probably right. Nobody could save the Emperor better than Cassandra. The Second Prince wasn't expecting them to be there. He wouldn't know until he returned to the Capitol, and they still were a little bit ahead. They still had a chance that the War God would return too, but they didn't have any more information on his whereabouts. Actually, the information they did have was that neither of the Princes were there. The old Emperor, however, was there, and was very sick. She let out a long sigh of frustration.

"What about Kassian?"

"We can watch him here," immediately replied Yasora.

"What makes you think I trust you?" retorted Missandra, a bit too coldly.

The middle-aged woman put her fists on her waist. She knew that the young lady was Cassandra's younger sister, but she could use some manners!

"Well, you're still alive, aren't you? Also, there isn't a single human being in this place that doesn't owe their life to Cassandra. She freed us from slavery or servitude, which was just as bad. Everyone here would die for her."

Missandra pouted. Why was it that Cassandra always had that kind of effect on people? The North people, the Diamond people, and now these servants, everyone loved her. Was it okay to trust them? If it was up to Missandra, she wouldn't even have entrusted them with a single hair of her nephew! She let out a long sigh, turning to her sister once again.

"I suppose we don't have any better option?" she asked, totally ignoring Yasora's glare.

"I'm afraid not," said Cassandra. "No one knows where I came from, or that I'm in any way related to this place, aside from the Prince. At least Vrehan won't be able to find them here, even if something happens to us."

This way, even if something happened to Cassandra, Kairen would immediately know where to look for their son. She didn't say that out loud, though, as Missandra was already rather upset.

"Fine, say that I do agree to all of this, what's the plan? How do we get into the Imperial Palace? Because the heavily guarded situation is still pretty much a problem there."

Cassandra took a minute to think about it. Unfortunately, there was no way the dragon could fly them into the Palace. This was the way she had most used, recently. The only exception had been with Shareen, when she had gone downtown. But then they had used the main gates, and that was out of the question.

“You could use the servants’ entrance?”

They turned around. The young Mara had just come back, carrying a big bowl of meat buns since Kian had happily emptied the previous one. She carefully put the new bowl close to the young dragon, making sure to keep her fingers away from it, and sat on her knees, close to Cassandra.

“The servants’ entrance?” asked Cassandra.

The young girl nodded.

“Do you remember when you came back and the dragon ate the Master? A lot of the other servants left, but some are still my friends, and now they work at the Imperial Palace. They said the servants’ entrance is not well-guarded, there are only two guards!”

Cassandra and Missandra exchanged looks, a bit doubtful. Only two guards? That almost seemed a bit too good to be true. She actually had no idea there was a different entry for the servants, but remembering her days at the Imperial Palace, Cassandra had indeed noticed that they would appear to come out of literally nowhere. They had to stay out of sight, so as to not annoy the many members of the Imperial Family. The Imperial Servants were often invisible to most people, walking quickly and keeping their heads lowered. In a strange way, it almost made sense. So many scholars, ministers, Imperial Advisors, and soldiers were circulating through the main door, who would bother with the lower-class people? The servants entrance should actually be much less guarded.

“We are still pale,” Missandra reminded her.

“Well, we have already proven to be good at disguising ourselves, haven’t we? If you managed to fool them once, when we only had a bit of make-up and a few trees to hide behind, you should be able to do it again, right?”

Missandra was bitterly starting to regret her display of make-up skills now. She sighed and turned to Yasora and Mira.

“Do you think you could get us some servant outfits and make-up?”

“Anything you need! We have servants going to the market and shops every day, no one will suspect a thing.”

Just like that, Missandra and Cassandra started reviewing each step of their plan, with Yasora and Mira’s help. The more she heard her sister, the more Cassandra knew she was going to accept this. Missandra was making sure every detail of their plan to infiltrate the Palace would work, and there was no end to her questions. Just from hearing her talk, she could tell her younger sister had much experience in dealing with all kinds of people. She was talking about the guards’ rounds and breaks, the servants’ schedules, the rotations and tasks inside the Palace.

However, they didn’t have that much time to spend talking. No matter how well they tried to plan this, they wouldn’t be able to prevent anything bad happening. With that in mind, Yasora sent a couple of servants to go grab the things Missandra asked her. While they waited for their return, the sisters agreed to go to the Palace early that afternoon. Cassandra didn’t want to lose any more time. She knew that right after lunch the activity inside the Palace would be much calmer, as it would be time for court. Cassandra only had a glimpse of the Emperor’s activities, but with his illness, she expected the Ministers and Generals to have even more work to make up for his absence. They had a rough idea on which areas to avoid, thanks to Mira’s servant friends, and they agreed that neither the Fourth or Fifth Princes were to be trusted. Cassandra wasn’t too sure about Opheus, but she definitely didn’t want to run into Lephys. Missandra’s plan was simple; avoid anyone wearing purple and get to the Emperor’s quarters as quickly as possible.

When the servants came back with all the make-up, they ate a quick lunch and started getting ready, being more cautious about the tan and returning their locks to a solid black color. This felt all too familiar, but the preparation was necessary. Once the sisters were ready, Yasora nodded.

“You do look like our people now... except for your eyes, of course.”

“We’ll have to remember to look down,” said Missandra.

Meanwhile, Cassandra was hugging Kassian. The baby hadn’t been very noisy during their preparations, but as if he knew what was going on, he was now starting to cry and get upset. This broke Cassandra’s heart. She had been with her son for a full week. If this wasn’t so important, she wouldn’t separate from him, even for a short while. She hugged him closely, kissing his forehead and whispering to calm him down. At her feet, Kian too seemed nervous, walking in circles and emitting quick, little, high-pitched sounds, trying to get her attention.

“It’s going to be fine, my love,” she whispered. “Your mom will be right back, I promise.”

Kassian started crying even louder, and she had to take a deep breath before hugging him, and the Baby Dragon, one last time. It was difficult to feel their warmth and part with it. She gave her baby to Yasora, and made a promise to herself. This wasn’t going to take long. She’d definitely be back soon for her son.

Cassandra had the urge to cry when they left the residence, but tried her hardest not to. Even Missandra had her little good-bye moment with her nephew and his small dragon, but she didn’t say anything. She knew she couldn’t afford to be emotional now, they had to focus on this plan and ensure their survival. Even if she had agreed to it, Missandra was still not feeling anywhere near confident enough. Anything could get them killed, even the slightest mistake could end their lives in a split second.

At least they looked different now. With green dresses on, their skin darkened to match those of the people, and their hair black as ink, they would be hard to spot by any soldiers who were looking for them. Not having a baby or a young dragon definitely made it easier to move around, too. They also had an extra asset, as Mira had rallied a few of the former servants of the house. They quickly met the three girls in the middle of the market, where no one would be suspicious. They were all familiar with Cassandra, as they had worked under the same roof, briefly. These three had been there the day she had freed the residence, and even if they were now working at the Imperial Palace, they were happy to look out for her and help the sisters as repayment.

This was also a good omen in Missandra’s eyes. The two sisters would be less likely to be noticed if they walked into the Palace as a group of five servants instead of a duo. They had no idea if the Second Prince was looking only for Cassandra, or for the both of them. In any case, this was still working in their favor.

They walked towards the Imperial Palace, and seeing the high walls from up close gave Cassandra an inexplicable feeling of nostalgia. She hadn’t been there in weeks, and this time, she wasn’t with Kairen. She had never liked this place, but this feeling of dislike was much stronger now. To Cassandra’s surprise, the soldiers weren’t very familiar with the servants going in and out all day. They checked their belongings in detail, but they didn’t find the hidden daggers on either of the sisters. She realized there were truly too many servants for the soldiers to bother recognizing all of them. The Imperial Palace was gigantic, and with all of the Imperial Concubines, Princes and Princesses, the servants probably changed a lot every week. It was probably the same for the soldiers as well. Unless the same soldiers would be assigned to the same

doors every single day for weeks and weeks, it seemed hard to think they'd remember the faces, unless they were memorable.

Ironically, one of the soldiers even smiled at Missandra, though his eyes were focused a bit lower. Cassandra had a little fright, but to her surprise, her younger sister even had the guts to wink at the soldier! She kept her head low, trying to pray silently until they were inside and away from the soldiers. All the girls smiled at each other.

"I can't believe we got in that easily," whispered Cassandra.

"That's because the Imperial Family isn't actually in danger all of the time," sighed one of the girls. "You know, the danger usually comes from the inside. They poison each other and find excuses to murder each other more efficiently than any assassin out there. Aside from that, they have dragons! Like, those creatures are terrifying!"

Cassandra and Missandra exchanged glances. The dragon they had been living with over the past few days wasn't exactly terrifying, though they did understand the girls' concern. They probably didn't picture Kian eating meat buns while saying that.

"I don't even think they ever bother to hire assassins," added the other with a nod. "You know, sometimes those women scare me more than the dragons themselves. A single tantrum and they can have you tortured or killed!"

As the girls kept nodding and agreeing, Cassandra realized this was the reality for them. She had always been protected by Kairen, his dragon, and his family. But for any servant working in the Imperial Palace, they were risking their lives every day. This should never be considered normal. It does explain the large turnover and high salaries, though.

After reaching one of the servants' resting rooms, Missandra and Cassandra parted from the girls, thanking them for their help in getting to this point. Somehow, Cassandra felt like they were entering the part of their plan where everything could go downhill very fast.

Walking with trays of food, as if they had been asked to deliver them somewhere, they tried to find their way through the corridors. The sisters had previously agreed to not go anywhere near Lady Kareen's apartments, or Kairen's, or Shareen's, as they would be very likely watched. Those would be the first places Vrehan would expect her to hide, so they had to avoid those aisles at all costs. Another thing Cassandra was worried about were the Concubines.

Though there weren't a lot of Princesses hanging around, the Concubines were often going from one place to another, chatting with each other in the gardens and wandering around. Cassandra was afraid one of them would recognize her if they crossed paths, and this was bound to happen. She made sure to keep her head down, hoping her appearance and green dress would do the trick. Moreover, as Missandra had reminded her, even Cassandra's body shape had changed a lot over the past few weeks. The only thing that may give her away was her green eyes, and she kept them down while they walked.

It worked. Despite a few frights on the way, Cassandra made sure to walk behind her sister and thankfully none of the Concubines they crossed paths with had recognized her. Most of the women didn't even spare them a glance, they were used to the servants getting out of their way.

The Imperial Palace was so vast, it took some time to get to their first destination. Prince Sephir's apartments.

Despite Missandra's warnings, Cassandra just couldn't come here without checking what had happened to the First Prince or his Concubines and children.

Besides, if she had any allies left between these walls, it would most likely be those women. She vaguely remembered the configuration of the First Prince's apartments, and the sisters moved quickly.

The atmosphere was heart-wrenching in there. Some of the women were still silently crying and mourning the death of the Prince, but at least, most of them seemed safe, the children also. Cassandra was extremely careful while moving around. She wasn't sure where the two Concubines she was looking for resided exactly, so Missandra eventually asked another servant they met, pretending she was new in the Imperial Palace.

Once they found their rooms, Cassandra knocked, a bit afraid. To their surprise, a little girl in a purple dress came to open the door. She was four or five years old at best.

"Silena, don't just... Oh, by the Great Dragon!"

The young Concubine ran to them and pulled the sisters inside before hurriedly closing the door. Then, she turned around, completely stunned.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

She had obviously recognized Cassandra, so she put down the tray on a table. They were alone, too, and the room was now closed, despite Missandra sending regular glances towards the other openings.

Lady Chiara walked to Cassandra, staring at her as if she had seen a ghost, looking on the verge of tears.

“By the Great Dragon, Lady Cassandra, I can’t believe you’re here,” she whispered.

“Are you alright?” asked Cassandra, as the young woman seemed completely in shock.

The young Concubine immediately shook her head, looking horrified, and about to cry.

“You shouldn’t have come here! The Second Prince wants to kill you.”

“Noted,” said Missandra, rolling her eyes.

“No, no, this is serious!” insisted Chiara. “He... he said you poisoned my Lord.”

“What happened?” asked Cassandra, hoping she would calm down a little bit to explain.

The young Concubine shook her head and fell onto her knees. Her daughter immediately ran into her arms to hug her, and she held her child, crying silently.

“I’m not sure. It all happened so fast! Everything was just as usual, and one evening, I heard people yelling, screaming... The other Concubines kept saying our Lord had died. Prince Vrehan came out of his room, all of sudden, dragging Lady Berissa by her hair, calling her a murderer! He yelled to everyone that he had caught her poisoning his brother with something the white witch had given her! Everyone started screaming, we knew Lady Berissa was innocent, but...his dragon...he killed her there, and... They said my Lord was dead.”

The poor Concubine was bawling her eyes out in front of them. Cassandra exchanged a look with Missandra, horrified. What had Vrehan done? How could he push all the blame on Berissa and kill her without a proper trial, or even any decent proof!

“How could the Emperor let that happen?” said Cassandra, shocked.

“It happened so fast,” cried Lady Chiara. “When his Highness the Emperor came, he was devastated about my Lord’s passing, and he was furious at Prince Vrehan, but the Second Prince said he had acted impulsively out of anger.”

“That’s the most bullshit excuse I’ve heard, even coming from that dickhead,” hissed Missandra.

Cassandra was in complete shock. She hadn’t thought things had become so tragic! The poor Lady Berissa, she had been the cruel victim of Vrehan’s schemes to get rid of her and his brother. Cassandra was completely revolted. This was so unfair! These people were innocent, Prince Sephir had never even been a threat to him! Vrehan’s cupidity was absolutely disgusting! Had Kassian’s birth really made him panic and kill his own brother? Did the news of her pregnancy accelerate the Second Prince’s agenda?

“Lady Cassandra, you shouldn’t be here. They all think you’re a murderer, the soldiers will arrest you.”

“What about Prince Sephir’s Son?” asked Cassandra, ignoring the Concubine’s plea.

“I don’t know...” cried Chiara. “We haven’t seen him since our Prince’s death. By the Great Dragon, if something happened to Prince Seban too...”

The poor Concubine hugged her daughter closer and cried even more. Cassandra and Missandra exchanged a silent glance. They wouldn’t say it in front of this poor woman, but they feared the young Prince’s fate was, unfortunately, already sealed. Vrehan may have taken the young dragon, too.

After all this, no wonder this whole aisle of the Imperial Palace felt so abandoned and at a loss. The Second Prince had wreaked havoc in his brother’s entourage. Cassandra felt like it was a miracle that the little girl in the Concubine’s arms was still alive. If she had been born a boy, her uncle would have gotten rid of her, most likely.

“What about Prince Sephir’s Dragon?” asked Missandra, frowning.

“He’s here, but...he hasn’t been able to fly,” said Chiara, her voice hoarse. “Prince Vrehan had Sire locked down in the dungeons, saying he could be dangerous for everyone in the palace without his Master to guide him. I’m not sure. He didn’t even try to free himself when they took him!”

The cells! Cassandra remembered seeing some of the dragons behind bars, the first time she had been in the Imperial Palace. Those who were too unruly had to be

chained or placed in cages for their sizes. However, she clearly remembered that the Pale Blue Dragon wasn't among those who had to be put in an actual cage! That was definitely another one of the second Prince's horrible lies.

"So the Prince is dead for real, and his dragon is grounded," sighed Missandra.
"Anything else we need to know?"

"What about the Emperor?" asked Cassandra. "Have any of you seen him lately?"

"No...most of us haven't dared to leave these apartments! Everyone is just so scared since our Prince died! However, some of the other Concubines came and said he's ill. The Emperor fell sick soon after my Prince. They say he was so depressed with my Lord's death that the Emperor fell sick too. We haven't seen him in days."

"How convenient," muttered Missandra.

Cassandra didn't believe this lie at all either. For something to happen to the old Emperor so soon after his First Son's death, was nothing but the result of some vile plan. He wasn't such a weak man, even if his son's death was depressing. Whatever sickness had fallen upon the old Emperor was definitely not the result of sadness, or even an accident. Missandra shook her head, disgusted once again.

"Hinue," she said using their native tongue. "I'm pretty sure he won't be as stupid as to leave his old man without any sort of security around him. What if this is a trap? I can't believe no one was able to see the Emperor. This guy definitely has something up, and I'm not sure we should run into this mess. We can still go back!"

"We can't, Missandra. We haven't learned anything we didn't already suspect, but the Second Prince still isn't here. I'm still sure this is our only chance to save the Emperor, if that is still possible. If the Second Prince comes back and is somehow crowned before my Prince comes back, the situation will be even worse than this! Not only Sephir, but he will also get rid of all of his brothers and their Concubines! This will be a slaughter!"

"He can't just..."

"Missandra, he killed Sephir! He killed the First Prince and his Favorite, and probably their son, too. Unless he's captured him instead, but I'm pretty sure he doesn't care about anything except that boy's dragon! If we go back now, Vrehan might be able to kill his father even faster, and then what? He'll just do what he did here to all the Concubines! The only people left will be the ones who didn't oppose him, his Concubines, and his sisters!"

“This is too dangerous! That psycho had no problem killing his own brother, right under the Emperor’s nose. If the Emperor is too ill to protect you, what do you think will happen to you? He’s capable of feeding you to his dragon and claiming his damn lizard mistook you for a beefsteak once the Third Prince comes here! There is no one here who can help you!”

“Actually, we might have another ally,” sighed Cassandra.

“Who?” asked Missandra with a frown.

“Glahad, the Golden Dragon.”

Missandra stayed quiet for a while, looking more and more livid. After a while, she glanced down at the Concubine that was still in the room with them and took a deep breath.

“I knew the situation was dire,” she said in their native tongue. “But I didn’t think it would be so bad that our best hope would rely on the Emperor’s freaking Dragon! Hinue, we are talking about an actual dragon. Not a cat-sized one like Kian! I know the Third Prince’s black Dragon is basically your pet, but this is another Dragon we’re talking about, the Emperor’s! I’m pretty sure the most dangerous creature in the Empire hasn’t been trained to do paw tricks!”

“Dragons only mimic their owners’ feelings. Krai is like that because of Kairen’s feelings for me. The Emperor liked me too, you’ve seen it. He’s been nothing but nice and...”

“He is an Emperor! Who knows what that old man was thinking! Gifting you a tiara and some stupid nickname doesn’t mean you’re his favorite daughter-in-law! I trust you, but I don’t trust a pervert that has taken dozens of Concubines, has kids left and right, all while his favorite woman has to live in a different castle to ensure her childrens survival!”

Cassandra sighed.

“I know this is the same refrain coming back again and again,” added Missandra. “But I stand by my words, I don’t trust the old man’s dragon! We can’t just walk in there and hope he’s going to become our bodyguard! That’s a rather big bet and I’m pretty sure we’re running out of extra lives just by standing here!”

“Do you have a better idea, perhaps? We were going to see if the Emperor can be saved anyway, Missandra. Perhaps Glahad won’t move a...claw to help us. At least it’s better than nothing, right?”

“This is us reducing our chances of getting killed by a dragon’s hair! And I know they don’t have any!”

Next to them, the young Concubine stood back up again, shaking her head. She grabbed Cassandra’s hand, as she was trembling herself, whilst looking her right in her eyes.

“Did you just say the Imperial Dragon’s name? Are you going to see the Emperor? Please, Lady Cassandra, you have to save him!”

Both sisters were flustered to see the young woman suddenly begging, but neither of them could react to her new burst of tears, as she held on desperately to Cassandra, her lower lips trembling. She didn’t look anything like the elegant young woman Cassandra had met only a few weeks ago. This was just a desperate girl, a mother begging for help to save her and her child.

“Please, you’re the Imperial Physician. You have to save his Highness! If the Emperor dies, I know he will kill us! The Second Prince will have us all exterminated, our children too!”

Against her leg, the young girl started crying too, echoing her poor mother’s distress. Cassandra’s heart broke. This little girl was so young, and she had just lost her father. How many of those children would have to grow up without their father now? They were all so terrorized already, but they were now living with the fear of their uncle finishing the job. Cassandra turned to her sister again, a determined expression in her eyes. Missandra couldn’t say anything, not anymore, not when they were so frantically being begged like so. The younger sister kept shaking her head in disbelief, but she didn’t voice her opinion anymore.

“I... I’ll go see the Emperor, Lady Chiara. Stay here with your daughter, it will be safer. Do not tell anyone you’ve seen us, please?”

“Of course, Lady Cassandra. Please, be careful. Some of my Prince’s Concubines are desperate. We are not stupid, none of us think Lady Berissa would have ever tried to harm our Prince! Even some of the Princesses are afraid!”

“What about the other Princes, by the way?” asked Missandra.

“We don’t know.”

Cassandra frowned. This was one thing she wished she could have resolved now. Not only were they in a den of wolves, but they couldn’t even be sure who was their enemy or not. She nodded, and gently retrieving her hand, she turned to Missandra.

“We should go, now.”

After checking their appearance, making sure nothing had been undone, the sisters left Lady Chiara, their hearts a bit heavier than before. Cassandra couldn’t get that little girl’s face out of her mind. She realized that somehow, she vaguely looked like her own son. Maybe it was because they were young, but those two children still had the same grandfather. That child was Kairen’s niece. So many innocent young lives were trapped here! The Concubines were more or less circled in the Second Prince’s residence. None of them had the means to leave, and they had no dragon to defend them either! With Sire locked in the cells underground, those women were nothing but prey for Vrehan to play with!

“We need to stop this,” muttered Cassandra, as they walked alone in a corridor.

“Let’s stay focused, we cannot make a mistake now,” whispered Missandra. “We’re lucky no one has recognized you yet, and that psycho isn’t here. Now, where is the old man?”

“The Emperor’s quarters were behind the room used for the banquets.”

“Why is this place so damn big!”

As they were about to turn left on a corridor, the sisters heard a ruckus, and stopped their steps at the exact same time, both frowning. They listened for a few seconds, but the situation was rather heated.

“You damn little bitches! I’m so fed up with this crap! You sluts! Get the fuck out of my way, go back to my pervert brother before I ruin my nails on your ugly faces! Uglies!”

Cassandra and Missandra absolutely froze. Though they had their doubts, this masculine voice and the mention of a pervert brother were enough clues to guess they had almost run into the fourth brother. They waited to see if he was coming this way, but it didn’t seem so, the sound of the man’s steps and whoever was following him were getting further away. Cassandra let out a silent sigh, while Missandra raised an eyebrow.

“Well, that explains why that one doesn’t have kids,” she muttered.

“Why?” asked Cassandra, confused.

Missandra rolled her eyes.

“That guy is definitely not into women. Trust me, I’ve seen a lot of guys like that in the Red District. This one is definitely a man-player. Plus, the only person I’ve heard being sassier than that guy is Lady Shareen, and that alone says a lot.”

“Oh...”

That did solve one mystery about the lack of descendants from Opheus, the Fourth Prince. However, that didn’t give any insight into his position towards his brothers. Was he affected by Sephir’s death? On Vrehan’s side, or uninterested? What of Prince Lephys? After what they had just heard, Cassandra crossed out any thought she ever had of asking for help from one of the other Princes. The relationships between all the siblings were too complicated and she had no idea who could be trusted or not at this point. Neither the Fourth or Fifth Prince had seemed close to Kairen, or even Sephir, from her experience. Nothing said they would agree with Vrehan becoming the Emperor either, though.

Waiting a bit for the path to clear, the sisters kept walking, until they finally arrived in the Banquet Hall. It was deserted at that time, and most importantly, the area was completely unused at the moment. It would have been suspicious for two servants to walk into a room not in use, with food trays, so the two sisters had to act quickly and not linger.

Cassandra remembered that whenever one of the Banquets she attended in the past was over, the Emperor left through a door behind his Golden Throne. The Emperor’s seat was so large and impressive, it seemed like a wall behind him, but Cassandra clearly remembered seeing Glahad curled up in that space, between the actual wall and his owner’s seat. No one wanted to go anywhere near the Imperial Dragon’s favorite spot, but she knew the doors to the Emperor’s apartments had to be behind that throne.

However, as soon as the sisters pretended to walk through the Banquet room, both noticed the men guarding that door. They pretended to chat and leave the room, but as soon as the door was closed behind them, Missandra shook her head.

“So, no big dragon, but two guards. I wouldn’t have been surprised if that psycho had put more men than that. How are we supposed to get to the Old Man now?”

However, Cassandra wasn't listening to her. She was already staring away at one of the windows. She walked to the opening and stuck her head out to look down. Missandra frowned in confusion.

"Hinue, what are you doing?"

"When my Prince had... Well, when he injured Princess Phetra, he threw her out of one of the banquet room's windows. Lady Kareen had mentioned there were only three or so floors below, and she was right, there's actually a roof. I can see it from here. The building below goes all the way down to the Emperor's apartments."

Her sister shook her head in disbelief. That was it. Her older sister had officially gone crazy!

"I'm not breaking my ankles to go and save a dying old man," said Missandra, coming to stand next to her at the window, to check what was below.

Cassandra chuckled and pointed her finger.

"We don't have to fall if we can climb. Just like I thought, the stones in the walls are very uneven. Which means we could possibly climb laterally until we reach it. We would use the outside instead of walking inside and past the guards."

Missandra was astonished. This idea was easily taking first place for the most dangerous idea her sister had that day, and that was saying a lot! Sure, they were exceptional swimmers, but swimming was nothing like climbing up and down walls! Missandra was about to protest, but for the first time, she decided against it. Instead, she scrutinized the wall Cassandra was thinking of climbing.

Indeed those were the typical rock constructions of the Dragon Empire. It was mostly uneven, however, from the many years of dragons attempting to climb on the buildings. Large, sharp claws had clearly scratched deeply into the wall, taking off some of the stones and helpfully given the duo even more spots to safely put their hands and feet on. Technically speaking, this wasn't impossible. Both girls were in pretty good shape, physically speaking. Missandra hesitated a moment, sending a backwards glance towards the other room. Those guards didn't look to be the pleasant type at all. That damn Second Prince had probably chosen men that would guard his father's room very carefully. She quickly tried coming up with another strategy to get rid of them, but Missandra was nervous someone would recognize her; she resembled Cassandra too much.

Missandra decided the climb, in comparison, didn't look as dangerous or as crazy to try. They had the physical condition for it, a stable and hidden path, and they even had the luxury of a rooftop below them to fall on, in case of failure. Of course, they'd probably suffer major injuries like Phetra if they did fall. But at least, the chances of survival were decent, given the situation.

Checking that the corridor was empty, Cassandra climbed out of the window, carefully hanging onto the window's rail. She moved to the first target, a larger hole in the wall. She had never liked the Imperial Palace, but the place was old enough to have had many, many dragons' claws leave their imprints on the walls. The indents in the stones gave her some easy spots to grab onto and move around. Sure enough, Cassandra made her way to the external walls of the previous corridor. Biting her lower lip, Missandra watched her sister's progress. Every imprint that she placed her foot or hand into seemed stable. Not even a speck of dust moved. Checking her surroundings, Missandra climbed out of the window to follow her.

Quickly and silently, the sisters moved around the external walls, keeping their heads below the windows. The main danger would be that someone spotted them from another window. However, from what they had seen so far, not many people were hanging around the premises. So they continued moving, climbing the wall sideways until their position was past the guards they had seen inside. There were some problems, though. Cassandra had no idea how many rooms there were inside, their configuration, or who might be inside. They would have to take a guess on which window to climb back in through, but they had to decide quickly. Climbing was a difficult exercise, and neither of them were very experienced at it. Their arms were starting to get painful and their muscles were aching. A pearl of sweat was growing on Missandra's forehead, threatening to take away some of the fake tan that was covering her. When she finally found a position right under one of the windows she could stay in without too much strain, Cassandra stopped, trying to listen to what was going on inside. Seemingly, nothing. The other side seemed strangely quiet, though she couldn't tell if this was a good sign or not. She exchanged looks with Missandra, who nodded. In any case, the longer they stayed there, the more risk they were taking of being found by someone. They had to climb back inside.

Carefully, Cassandra climbed up, glancing inside. It looked like she had actually picked a bathroom window! Luckily, that room was small, and with the door facing the window, she could immediately tell the place was empty. With a sigh of relief, both sisters climbed inside to finally rest their aching muscles.

Missandra stretched with a grimace and even went to the little basin of water to drink. Their arms were sore, but at least they had made it inside the Emperor's apartments.

Cassandra walked as quietly as she could and put her ear against the door. It was complete silence on the other side.

Very carefully, the sisters came out of the bathroom. This was truly a strange atmosphere, almost like the inside of a church. The aisle was beautiful, all made of marble and white stones, but it was as silent and intimidating as a mausoleum. In such an environment, each step or breath the sisters took seemed too noisy.

“All right, now to find the Old Man,” whispered Missandra.

Cassandra nodded, and they started walking down the corridor. They had no idea which door to push, and were terrified to run into someone that would give away their position. However, after a while, it looked like this place was truly abandoned. They pushed open many doors, each time to find an empty room.

“Are you sure these are the Emperor’s apartments?” asked Missandra, frowning. “There’s nothing going on here!”

“I don’t understand,” muttered Cassandra. “If he’s sick, the Emperor should definitely be kept in his apartments!”

“That’s the rule of the Imperial Palace? Well, someone needs to learn them again, because the Old Man isn’t here! Cassandra, this place is completely empty! There’s not even a single servant, those two idiots outside are guarding nothing but air!”

Cassandra shook her head in disbelief. Where was the Old Emperor then? If he was sick, the Emperor should be resting here, in his quarters! The sisters turned to each other.

“That damn Second Prince expected someone would come and he probably hid the Old Man elsewhere!” Missandra decided.

“But where? It’s the Emperor, he can’t simply vanish this way!”

“We...”

A sudden movement was felt from somewhere behind Missandra. Both sisters froze. Something was moving just outside of the room they were in. They slowly turned around, and it was there at the window. One reptilian blue eye, surrounded by white scales. Staring right at them.

Both sisters almost stopped breathing. A drop of cold sweat ran down Cassandra's spine. She had been hoping to find the Emperor and his Gold Dragon, but this was definitely not Glahad. Where did this white one come from? The sisters hadn't even heard anything until then. Missandra didn't dare move either, but she sent a glance towards her sister. No words were exchanged, but her expression was clear. Which dragon was that?

Cassandra tried hard to remember. She couldn't remember if the White Dragon was the Fourth or the Fifth Prince's, she had only seen it once! She couldn't even see its size, as only a little portion of its head was stuck against the window. The only thing that was a little bit reassuring was that it didn't seem to be unhappy at all. The white creature wasn't growling, and its eye just seemed...curious. Was it simply observing them? Either way, if it was there, its master definitely knew where they were. She didn't want to wait to see which Prince was about to show up!

"Let's go back," she whispered.

Missandra nodded slightly, but neither of them could take their eyes off the gigantic beast staring at them. Both sisters started stepping back, very carefully. The big blue eye was following their every move. They hesitated. They definitely couldn't go back the way they came in, with the White Dragon climbing along the tower as well. It would put them one arm away from the dragon, and its maw was definitely longer than that. Also, they had already struggled to get this far, Cassandra wasn't sure she would have the strength to go back the same way without making a mistake this time.

The main entrance then? It didn't solve the problem of the guards on the other side. The Dragon or the Prince could warn them at any time. Cassandra was trying to gauge their options quickly, but no good idea came to mind, and Missandra was terribly quiet too.

"What the hell are you doing here, you two idiots?!"

Cassandra sighed internally. It was too late.

Both sisters turned around, to find the Fourth Prince standing there. Opheus was very much like his brothers. Tall, with long black hair and fine musculature under his open shirt. His only marking trait was his strikingly blue eyes, both delicately circled by black ink. He was probably the most handsome of all the Imperial Brothers, but he was making a sour face at the moment with his arms crossed. The long gold earring on his left ear kept dangling as he shook his head.

"Sorry, Your Highness," said Cassandra, bowing instinctively. "We will leave and..."

“Oh, don’t you dare act like that! I recognized you, White Witch!” retorted Opheus.

Cassandra went white under her make-up. She had the feeble hope that he wouldn’t recognize her, as she didn’t recognize him either, until two seconds ago. It seemed impossible to pretend to be two clueless maids now.

The Prince let out a dramatic sigh.

“You are all driving me nuts here! Darling, I have a good memory for faces, and even if you were as skinny and bleached as a skeleton back then, I still vividly remember the unfashionable slave girl Kairen went nuts about! Lephys may have hundreds of his little whores, I don’t care. But the one lady that proved my older brother wasn’t just a monk with a sword, despite his questionable tastes, that one I remember!”

Cassandra was utterly speechless. She hadn’t expected the Prince to have such a... colorful personality. Until then, he had only been described as someone with a lazy and easily bored personality. It was apparently more about his attitude. At least, it didn’t seem like he had given any alerts yet.

Unsure of what to say, Cassandra glanced Missandra’s way. However, to her surprise, Missandra was nervously chuckling, focused on the Fourth Prince’s face. He noticed it too, and clicked his tongue, pouting his lips.

“You can stop staring like that, darling. We are not playing on the same level.”

“I know you,” suddenly said Missandra with a snicker. “You’re the Minstrel in Gold!”

“Oh,” said Opheus, raising an eyebrow.

Cassandra was completely lost. What was her younger sister talking about? The Prince himself didn’t seem very surprised, but his expression had completely changed after Missandra had said that. Cassandra turned to her, trying to understand what the hell she was talking about.

“Linue?” she called her.

“This Prince was a regular in the Red District!” exclaimed Missandra. “He was only known as the Minstrel in Gold, because his name was unknown and he always came dressed with lots of gold jewelry, and would always write stupid poems to his lovers.”

“Stupid poems? Watch your mouth, you little bitch! I’m a lyricist, and everyone always says I have a lot of talent!”

“Yeah, let me guess, Your Highness, they’re the same people to whom you generously give your gold to whenever they say that?” retorted Missandra with a snicker.

“Wait,” said Cassandra. “You know him from the Red District?”

“Well, not all the workers are female,” explained Missandra with a shrug.

“Oh...”

Cassandra hadn’t thought of that. It did make sense though. The Fourth Prince probably wasn’t given the kind of entertainment he wanted in the Imperial Palace. She clearly remembered his siblings talking about his lack of interest for his Concubines, despite his mother’s desperate attempts to have him give birth to an heir. Well, now that explained a lot.

Cassandra gave a little glance, but the dragon outside was still there, patiently watching. So they weren’t in danger with it so far. Opheus flipped his hair over his shoulder.

“I was wondering what my darling had found here, but it turns out, it’s just you two. You are quite stupid for coming back here, though. Do you have any idea what Vrehan wants to do to you? That psycho seriously went crazy this time.”

“What about you?” asked Missandra. “You don’t look like you’re about to report us.”

“Oh, please, do you think I care about my brothers’ stupid games?”

“This isn’t a game,” retorted Cassandra, almost shocked. “They are killing each other! Prince Sephir died!”

Opheus rolled his eyes.

“He was unfortunate to have been born first, yes. But me? I’m the one that nobody gives a shit about. Honestly, I’m quite content with that.”

Cassandra understood that he was the one nobody would see as a threat, but that doesn’t mean his brother’s crimes are any less horrible! His older brother had been murdered only a few days ago, he couldn’t be that insensitive as to not care at all!

However, he did look like he didn’t care. Opheus put a hand on his hip, gauging the two of them.

“I honestly don’t give a damn about reporting you, I don’t even care enough to yell,” he said. “However, I am curious why the hell Kairen’s favorite and her sister are in my father’s chambers.”

“We hope to save the Emperor,” explained Cassandra. “I know he is sick, I want to see him.”

“We can heal him,” added her younger sister. “If you tell us where the old man is, we can...”

Opheus scoffed, interrupting her. He used one of his long nails to point at Missandra.

“First, no offense, darling, but I wouldn’t entrust you with a spoon.”

Missandra looked put off by his words, but the Fourth Prince ignored her to turn to Cassandra.

“Secondly, why do you two care what happens to my father? Shouldn’t you be somewhere taking care of the brat you were pregnant with? Waiting patiently somewhere for your man to slice Vrehan’s head off? Because I’ll be honest, I know I am.”

Cassandra was a bit surprised to hear that.

“You don’t like Vrehan? You support Kairen?”

Opheus dramatically rolled his eyes once again.

“You may be a physician, or whatever, but you’re quite slow, darling, aren’t you? Vrehan is a freaking sicko, his sister Phetra is the Empress of the bitches, and trust me, I know much more than they all think I do. Comparatively, Kairen is at least not bouncing about, murdering our family members in some sick attempt to become Emperor.”

“So you can help us?” asked Cassandra, getting her hopes up again. “You can tell us where the Emperor actually is?”

“Why would I? I told you, I’m fine as long as neither of them thinks I’m against them. I am already being quite generous by not giving you little rats away to the guards. I hope you’re taking notes about that.”

Cassandra’s hopes melted immediately. So he wasn’t going to help them at all? Were the sisters condemned already? There was no way they were going to be able to walk

out of here while the two guards were still standing outside the apartments! They couldn't stay hidden here forever either!

Next to her, Missandra took a deep breath and crossed her arms, looking surprisingly confident.

"Well, it's a bit too late for that, isn't it? You're already an accomplice."

"What?"

"You've seen us. Like you said, you didn't denounce us right away and you have no intention to. So, that means you're on our side."

Opheus narrowed his eyes, looking a bit confused.

"Didn't you listen to anything I just said, you little pest? I am not on anyone's side! Unless I go into the throne's room and walk around naked, I won't be considered a target by Vrehan either! I am the invisible Prince and I like that!"

"Oh, but you have seen us already. So now, you're technically hiding our existence from the Second Prince. If we get caught and say you had actually found us first, it would be bad for you, wouldn't it? You wouldn't be so invisible anymore."

Cassandra couldn't understand. What was Missandra thinking by provoking him like that?! Despite her doubts, she remained quiet to let her younger sister talk. After those few weeks together, Cassandra knew that Missandra was better than her for those kinds of things. Missandra was what you'd call street-smart; she was better at getting out of a situation when she was cornered.

"What are you talking about?!" screeched the Fourth Prince. "I am not helping you, I'm just keeping my mouth shut!"

"Oh, I bet the Second Prince will think the same when he learns that you had us right under your nose and did not let his soldiers know. He'll probably overlook this and think you just didn't care."

Opheus opened and closed his mouth twice, completely taken aback. Finally, he scoffed, outraged by Missandra's words and her confident smirk. Putting his hands on his hips, he was now glaring at her.

“Why shouldn’t I give you up right now then, you little pests? I am extremely generous already to let you go without saying a word! Why the hell are you threatening me?!”

“I am not threatening you,” replied Missandra with an innocent smile. “Of course, you’re very free to rat us out to the psychopath’s men if you prefer. However, I cannot guarantee that the War God won’t be back first.”

Once again, the Fourth Prince was rendered speechless and blinked several times.

“Kairen? He’s coming back here? Seriously?”

Missandra nodded. Whether she was truly convinced or lying through her teeth, her older sister couldn’t tell. However, they clearly weren’t sure that the War God was really on his way back, or even how far away he was at the moment. This was a heavy bet her sister was putting on the table right now.

“Yes. His Favorite Concubine is here, after all,” she said. “The War God will be back in the Capital at any time. I mean, you could give us up, but it would truly be bad timing if the Third Prince came back meanwhile. If the War God learns that you sold out his Favorite Concubine... If my older sister dies, just like that, I wonder who he will get mad at? I mean, obviously, the Second Prince is the first choice, but I wonder who he will get angry at then? It tends to get pretty bloody when the War God gets mad, you know.”

Cassandra was once again stunned speechless. Her younger sister was truly shameless! She was putting the Fourth Prince in a horrible position, torn between the fear of the Second or Third Brother’s wrath. It was too late for him to pretend he hadn’t seen them, not after everything Missandra had just said. The poor man looked like he was about to vomit, he was completely trapped by the teenage girl.

“You... You... By the Great Dragon, you’re the worst little swine!” He yelled. “That was me being nice!”

“Oh, it’s nice of you to not rat us out, but now we would like to know where the Emperor is. So now, you can pick a side. Because either you help us and we can get out of here without making any waves, and potentially getting a chance to save the old man. Or my sister and I will get caught as soon as we try to get out of here, by your sicko brother’s men, tortured, and will most likely die in a horrible way. Your choice, Your Highness.”

