

Chapter 22

The man stood up, letting out an exhausted sigh.

He was drenched in blood. His blood and that of the two dragons he had just fought. The dragons weren't dead. One was lying down on the ground, a sword pinning his wing, and the other was cornered, growling furiously while trying to hide his injured leg. The War God's body was covered in black scales, struggling to heal the many cuts on his body. All of his armor had been torn away, leaving him with only his pants on. He put his hand on his neck, checking the fresh injury. His own blood tainted his fingers as he snickered.

They had really given it their all at trying to kill him. However, those two young dragons were mostly afraid, trapped in a tight room with him. In a more open ground, they probably would have had more chances to succeed in killing him. However, in here, they were as trapped as he was and unable to use their wings. They even hindered each other quite a few times, mistakenly biting or scratching their skins. Without that, maybe they would have had a better chance.

"Kairen!"

He heard a long bang on the door behind him and turned around. His sister violently burst in, sending the locked doors flying. Shareen's hair was all over her face, and she seemed angry. She had her sword out, too, for the minute it took her to assess the situation. Kairen, standing alone in the vast room, with a young Dragon cornered at each end of it. She clicked her tongue, shaking her head, and putting her sword back away.

"So, this was his great trap. Using young dragons," she growled, approaching the two beasts. "I fucking knew it."

"You know those?" asked Kairen.

Shareen rolled her eyes, pointing at the two dragons.

"Make an effort, Brother. You can't even recognize your own nephews' dragons? I know we haven't seen them more than a couple of times, but still. This one is from Vrehan's second son, and this one is Sephir's son's. Damn it, that asshole really used the kids."

Kairen frowned.

“Shareen, what are you doing here?”

“You could at least pretend you’re happy to see me!”

“You should be in the North,” he insisted, frowning.

Shareen nodded, putting her hands on her hips. His sister had come wearing her armor, and seeing how stained it already was, she had probably fought her way there. She didn’t have a scratch on her, though. Only a few pearls of sweat and her ruined outfit.

“I would still be in the North if it wasn’t for that dead ass Vrehan making a fucking ruckus at the Diamond Palace.”

“What?”

The War God’s anger rose immediately, scaring the two dragons in the room into retreating even further away from him with whimpers. Kairen didn’t give a damn about those two. However, the Diamond Palace was where he had left his mother and his concubine. The mere mention of his half-brother anyway near them was not something he wanted to hear. Shareen didn’t make the suspense last, either.

“Yeah, it is bad. That rat face walked into Mother’s Palace, claiming to be under our Father’s orders to arrest Cassie.”

The vein at his temple was violently thumping as his eyes darkened in anger. Kairen’s murderous intent had never, ever been anywhere near that bad before.

“He took Cassandra?” he hissed.

“No, thank the Gods. She and her sister managed to run away, but Vrehan is definitely after them. That’s why I came to get you back as soon as I could. Anour stayed back with Mother. I didn’t want to leave her alone.”

Kairen was absolutely furious, even if his concubine hadn’t been caught yet, he loathed the idea of anyone near her. Let alone those who wanted to harm her. His blood went cold, thinking about something else.

“What of our son?”

“Apparently, he’s been born and is well, from the last news we got of them. Congrats, I guess.”

Kairen was furious. He had broken his promise to Cassandra. She had given birth alone, and he had missed their child’s birth. For now, he didn’t want any congratulations until his concubine and son would be with him to receive them. Furious, he turned around and walked towards the two terrorized dragons. They tried to growl, to warn him not to approach, but he ignored them and came closer.

“Which one?” he asked.

“This one is Seban’s,” said Shareen, pointing at the dark blue dragon with its wing half-ripped.

Without adding another word, the War God walked to the other dragon. The tall brown beast growled furiously, trying to retreat as much as he could in his corner and show his fangs. When Kairen got close enough, the dragon jumped forward, trying to attack in a desperate attempt. The War God sliced its head off.

The dragon’s head rolled away from its body, while the other dragon whimpered in fear from the scene before him. Shareen didn’t react much. This was legitimate, in their world. She was even surprised that he had apparently decided to spare Seban’s dragon, despite the already poor state of the creature. She glanced down, but the indigo creature was pitifully shivering, its eyes fixated on Kairen in sheer fear.

“You poor one,” she sighed.

However, the War God didn’t have time for another glance at the young dragon. Kairen walked out of the building, walking back into the battle. Despite his absence, his men were not at a loss.

The Imperial Army was well-trained and perfectly capable by itself. The absence of their Commander-in-Chief for a few hours had not stopped them at all, as they finished the fight against the invader. There were a lot of victims and bodies, but few from the Dragon Empire’s people. On her way there, Shareen had been surprised to see how many common people were actually helping the soldiers, using those strange little boxes to tend their injuries. It was even more obvious now that the battle had died down, and the last of the enemies that remained alive were brought together.

The War God had no time to waste. Ignoring all the men that tried to inquire about his situation or rejoice about their victory, he walked straight into the building where his generals had been put together.

“Your Highness! How come you’re...”

“Where is their leader?” growled Kairen, ignoring all of them.

One man was dragged forward, and his fancy uniform clearly gave away his high ranking among his army. Despite the large, ugly open injury on his head, he still had a defiant look while facing Kairen.

“Long live the Eastern Republic! We shall not obey the barbaric...”

Shareen gave a violent kick to his jaw before he could finish that sentence. The sound of his teeth breaking against one another made several men grimace. The man coughed up some blood, looking horrified.

“A w-woman! How dare you?! A woman cannot hit a man!”

“Sorry, darling, wrong Empire for your fucking chauvinism. Now, talk before I break however many teeth and bones you’ve got left, one by one.”

“I won’t talk! I will die for my country!” shouted the man, despite his mouth full of blood and his missing teeth. “I will never...”

“Oh, fuck you. Just die like an idiot then.”

Just like that, Shareen took out her weapon and killed the man right there. No one around was really surprised, as the Generals had witnessed this kind of thing countless times from the Imperial Family within the Palace where all their meetings were held. Kairen turned to them.

“Who else did we get?”

“No one that will talk, Your Highness,” sighed one of the Generals, shaking his head. “All the leaders we caught either committed suicide or swore they’d never surrender any of their country’s military secrets. We are still interrogating them at the moment.”

“This is annoying,” hissed Shareen. “We need proof of that rat face’s involvement in the war.”

“We have no proof that the Second Prince...”

“We have one already,” interrupted Kairen.

The men turned to him, a bit flustered.

“W-we do, Your Highness?”

“There are two dragons left inside a building in the southwest,” he said. “Get them and make sure they make the trip back to the Capital with us.”

He turned around to leave the building, while the Generals and Shareen followed after him.

“You want to use those two as proof?” she said. “Vrehan will pretend his son acted by himself!”

“Then we’ll just have to make his son and Sephir’s talk.”

“Kairen, Sephir is dead.”

Kairen stopped and turned around to face his sister. Around her, the high-ranked soldiers that had just heard that news looked shocked, all of them exchanging glances with their eyes wide open. Kairen was focused on his sister. Shareen’s expression was cold and serious, making him realize this was the truth.

The War God was shocked, more than he let on. Though they weren’t particularly close, he had always considered Sephir a real older brother. Maybe the one he was the closest to, after Anour. His fists clenched. Kairen resumed walking, not saying a word on what he thought about that news. That was just another crime added to the already large debt of what Vrehan would have to pay for.

“I need to go back to the Capital right away,” he hissed.

“Your Highness, you can’t!” pleaded one of the Generals, running after him. “I’m most sorry about the First Prince’s passing, but we need to officially end this war, fortify the border, and have the Eastern Army acknowledge they attacked us! We need to make their leaders pay for the damages, and sign a treaty at least!”

The War God suddenly turned around, grabbing the man by the collar under everyone else’s astonished eyes.

“My Concubine and my child are in danger. My older brother just got murdered and you’re fucking talking to me about damn paperwork. You don’t need me for that,” he growled.

“Your Highness!”

He threw the man away, ignored the rest, and kept walking, followed by his sister. No one else dared to follow him.

“Kairen, we have to stop by the Diamond Palace to get Mother,” declared Shareen.

“She can wait. I need to find Cassandra.”

“Kairen, stop a second and listen!” urged his sister. “Kairen, I know you just want to find them, but things are bad. There are rumors that Father has fallen ill, and Vrehan is acting in his stead. That little rat shit can have himself named Emperor the minute Father dies if he wants. Now that Sephir is gone and you’re away on a battlefield, he’ll give no choice to the ministers. No one knows your son is born, and Vrehan will definitely try to kill him and Cassie before it is known. We need to get Anour and Mother to help us deal with all this crap. We caught Phetra at the Diamond Palace. That bitch can still spill the beans about Vrehan.”

“Where is Cassandra?”

They were hurrying outside of the City, Kairen’s eyes on Krai, who was flying a few paces away. His dragon was not done hunting and killing the few survivors trying to flee the battle. Some of them were desperately trying to get to the frontier, but the Dragon wouldn’t even let them anywhere close to it.

Shareen sighed.

“According to Mother, Cassie and Missandra decided to head to the Capital. Thank the Gods, they managed to win some time by making that idiot Vrehan think they were headed North to the Onyx Castle instead. They are on their own with your son and his dragon, though, and we don’t even know if they are there yet. Dahlia was killed by Vrehan, too.”

“Dahlia?”

“That servant girl Mother placed by her side, the one that was always around Cassandra, remember? She died trying to protect your woman... Poor girl.”

Kairen nodded vaguely. He did remember a young servant girl that was always around Cassandra. He didn’t know she was one of his mother’s many spies, though. Not that he cared about that fact at all. His mother was definitely the type to do that kind of thing. All he could think about right now was finding Cassandra and their son, and making sure they were both safe. Anywhere far from Vrehan would be enough.

Roun, who had been waiting at the entrance of the City, stood up as soon as it saw them. Shareen had come on its back, so the Green Dragon had been expecting her to return. Meanwhile, Kairen waited for Krai to arrive, and jumped on the black dragon's back for their trip to the Diamond Palace. By the time they arrived there, Shareen had just finished telling him in detail everything that had happened on her side.

When they landed in their mother's garden, Kareen ran out to greet them. She hugged Kairen with a sad and angry look, and he noticed that she was holding something.

"That..."

"Oh, Cassie was working on it before all this happened," said his mother. "She wanted to give it to your son after his birth."

Kairen had recognized the little dragon plushie, despite the pretty embroideries his concubine had added to mend it. Even Krai, curious, sniffed the toy a bit before running to another aisle of the Diamond Palace. Kairen ran inside after the dragon. They were both headed exactly to the same place.

In the remote garden, everything had been left as it was. Krai was growling, looking at the scene, its back arched furiously. Kairen, too, squeezed the little plushie in his hand. They were both staring at the scattered remains of a dragon's egg. The War God's thoughts at that moment were unfit for words. He was just boiling inside, his eyes dark as obsidian.

Krai, too, kept sniffing the remains of the egg, restless. The dragon had felt the birth, yet the dragon wasn't there for its offspring. It felt just as defeated as its master. To Kairen, this was a bitter defeat. Though Cassandra had survived and managed to flee his brother's clutches, she was still on her own and unsafe. He hated not being with his concubine. He wanted her here, right by his side, where he could hold her and protect her. Cassandra was many things, but she was not a fighter, and she would never be. His blood was boiling when he dared to imagine his brother or any other man near her. He couldn't stand the idea of a single scratch on her soft, fragile white skin. She already had so many scars he could never do anything about. What did she have to go through again because he wasn't there?

She had been reluctant to send him, yet she knew it was his duty. Kairen had never loathed his title as War God as much as right now. He should have been there. With her, with their child. He didn't even know what his son looked like!

"Son, come," gently called Lady Kareen, appearing behind him. "We need to talk."

He nodded, and though his eyes had a hard time losing the horrible vision of the destroyed egg, he stepped back and joined her back inside. Krai was left there.

They reunited in one of Kareen's salons, but he just wanted to hurry to the Capital. He had followed his sister, only because Shareen had insisted on the best strategy to attack Vrehan and help Cassandra. Otherwise, he'd be miles away already. Their mother was seated on one of her throne-like chairs, but at her feet, Phetra was on her knees. As soon as she had seen Shareen and Kairen, her eyes had widened in absolute horror. She was a cunning woman, but outside of the Imperial Palace and without her brother to protect her, she was pitifully defenseless...although none of them felt an ounce of pity for her.

Anour and Evin were standing a few steps away, too. Kairen recognized the Imperial Servant, but only frowned a little and did not ask. He could easily imagine his sister had dragged him here from the North Army Camp. He was most interested in Phetra, that treacherous snake that had, according to what his sister had told him on the way there, injured Cassandra. Though she was already in a pitiful state, the War God slapped the woman.

The sound made by that slap was terrifying. The strength of those hands shook Phetra's whole head, and she was thrown on the floor once again, half of her face burning. She had felt several bones cracking, and the scream that resonated left no doubt about the amount of pain she was in.

Anour and Evin couldn't bear to look. Despite their education in this cruel environment, they couldn't help but feel bad witnessing the difference of strength between the War God and a woman. Kareen clicked her tongue.

"Kairen, we need that little rat alive."

"She's alive," said Shareen, her arms crossed.

She was staring at Phetra with a disdainful look. In Shareen's eyes, Phetra was already very lucky to be alive after angering their family and harming Cassandra. If it wasn't for Kareen, her brother would have most likely not stopped until she was slapped flat as a rug. Phetra's wailing was the only sound heard around, as all the Diamond Palace servants had scattered away.

Kareen put her chin on her fist.

"Anyway. While you were gone, I got some annoying news from my spies in the Capital."

“News from Cassie and Missandra?” asked Shareen.

“Sadly, no. They hadn’t arrived yet, but my men informed the residence that guy told us about,” said the Imperial Concubine while pointing at Evin. “In any case, they will be ready for their arrival, and of course, I appointed some men to watch the house and let me know as soon as they finally arrive.”

“I’m going to the Capital.”

“Kairen, I know you want to hurry there, my son, but wait a minute. There is more. First, my spies confirmed your father is ill. No one has seen the Emperor in days. The last councils have all been held without him or Sephir.”

“Those damn Ministers,” growled Shareen. “They are probably dancing around our treasury and doing whatever shit they want while no one is there.”

“Those your brother has corrupted, you mean,” said her mother. “Vrehan has always been very smart in politics, he probably has half of those greedy men ready to bow for him, and the other half scared to have him get some spring cleaning done while his father’s not there to stop him. In other words, he has the whole Imperial Palace working for him.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” asked Shareen.

“A dragon alone can’t solve everything, Shareen. If he has the Imperial Palace working for him, he’ll kill your father as soon as he returns there and be named Emperor. Then, he’ll raise both his army and the Imperial Army against you two. I know how strong my children are, but against two armies, even you won’t be able to get inside the Imperial Palace that easily!”

“We can just fly inside,” shrugged Shareen. “Who cares about the armies on the ground, if we come from above.”

“You think that snake, Vrehan, won’t have thought about that? Either he will have a trap ready or hide himself somewhere you can’t get to him so easily. He’s just the type to let others do the dirty work for him while never getting a speck of dirt on himself.”

Shareen rolled her eyes, annoyed.

“Let’s get to it, Mother, what do you suggest?”

Kareen pushed Phetra with her foot, making her wail again. The Princess was gagged though, and unable to speak. Her jaw was probably broken anyway, with those two trails of blood that were now rushing out her mouth. She was almost curling up against the throne, like a terrorized animal.

“While you children were gone, Miss Phetra, here, and I, had an interesting talk. Your older brother is expecting you to come flying. That useless little swine didn’t know the details, but her brother will have all of the skies filled with traps, most likely with catapults, giant crossbows, and so on. He is expecting Kairen to show up by himself with Krai. He will focus all of his men into stopping you, my son, no matter how much he’ll sacrifice. He is already days ahead of us, he will get to the Capital first, anyway, and I bet everything is all ready to welcome you there, on his orders. We have to think he will kill your father as soon as he can and have the Imperial Army return to do his bidding.”

“Then...”

“Get the Eastern Army to the Capital. He knows Kairen is not one to bother waiting and summoning his army, he won’t expect the Eastern Army to show up and fight Vrehan’s militia or the Imperial Army with him.”

“True... He would expect Kairen and I to show up alone without the army.”

“Exactly. Vrehan may be a coward, but he’s annoyingly smart. He will do whatever he can to delay Kairen’s return to the Imperial Palace, even throw a whole army at him. Make sure that little rat is distracted enough with what goes on outside, that he won’t have time to get to Cassandra. She is our best chance from the inside. If that smart girl manages to heal your old man or at least win us some time, we can even hope to get rid of Vrehan without too many issues. Though, if your father passes first, it will be much more difficult to get to Vrehan and Cassandra.”

Shareen wouldn’t say it out loud, but they all knew. The next victim in this conflict would most likely be their father. He had to be Vrehan’s first target upon coming back. They didn’t know why he wasn’t already dead, but since Cassandra and her son had escaped, the Second Prince would have no choice but to get rid of the old Emperor as fast as he could. Then he could be named Emperor, and get full control of the Imperial Army.

“But the Imperial Army went with Brother to the battlefield in the East,” said Anour. “Brother just returned, they can’t go back to the Capital faster than a Dragon.”

“Not all of the Army was sent here. The Emperor wouldn’t have left the Capital with no defense.”

“Father probably sent at least half of it from what I saw,” said Shareen.

“Then let’s assume half of the Imperial Army is still in the Imperial Palace with that little rat. Vrehan may have acted impulsively but he definitely knows Krai and Kairen will be his biggest problem. If you get there, expect a trap.”

“Mother, you can’t ask us to wait for the Eastern Army to get here!”

“They are already on the way,” retorted Kareen. “Who do you think I am? I sent a message as soon as you left to get your brother! They will meet you in the Capital.”

The brother and sister exchanged a glance and a nod.

“So we are good to go, right? The army will meet us there.”

“Yes, but do you children even know what to do once we get there?”

“We? Mother, you’re coming?” asked Shareen, shocked.

“Of course! What, you think this old lady will stand on the sidelines while your old man is in danger? You’re taking me for being more heartless than I am!”

She honestly had nothing to answer to that. So, instead, she pointed at Phetra.

“What about her? Do we kill her now? Has she said everything she had to?”

“Well, probably not,” said Kareen, standing up. “At least, I know how Vrehan managed to come here without your father’s approval. That little snake. He left the Palace with this annoying sister of his under the pretense of accompanying her to her wedding! Of course, they changed their course to come here and pretend they were arresting Cassandra under the Emperor’s order. I can’t believe I got fooled by those two. I bet they scattered information back at the Imperial Palace that they were already half-way there!”

She grabbed Phetra’s hair, dragging her mercilessly.

“The little bitch...” hissed Kareen. “She spilled all the names of the people Vrehan corrupted in the Imperial Palace, so I will have to do a thorough cleaning once we get there. She’s also the one who smuggled the poison that killed Sephir, though she didn’t know it was going to be used on her father as well.”

“So she knows the remedy?”

“That idiot? She can’t even tell the difference between blood and wine! She just did Vrehan’s dirty work, as always. Probably ordered from some market.”

“What about that abortion potion?”

“She kept saying it wasn’t intended for Cassie. Pretty sure she’s lying about that, but... In any case, she may be more useful once we get to the Imperial Palace and argue with her brother. She probably knows more dirt on him than she’ll say for now. She will talk once he abandons her for real. Who knows...”

Shareen shook her head. She had enough of all that. Kairen was the first to step out, calling his dragon to come. Krai was just as impatient and kept growling furiously. Both the Black Dragon and its Master wanted to hurry back into the Capital, as there was no time to lose. Cassandra was in danger, especially if she had decided to try and go save the Emperor from Vrehan’s clutches.

Kairen helped his Mother get on the Black Dragon, forcefully pulling Phetra on, too. Truth was, both Roun and Krai attempted to kill her until their Masters had them stop and keep their fangs away. The Black Dragon was unhappy about carrying that woman, but Kairen put her like a sandbag at the rear, on her stomach, the most uncomfortable position possible. She could still see Roun growling at her, as Shareen, Anour, and Evin were mounting the Green Dragon. Then, both dragons took off.

With each dragon carrying more people than usual, the flight took a little longer. As Kareen had predicted, the two big dragons’ appearance in the sky caused quite a commotion. Many soldiers pointed at them, and just like the information spilled by Phetra, catapults and giant crossbows appeared all over the Imperial Palace’s roof. Both dragons growled, but before they were within reach, they dove towards the south of the Capital. Evin’s directions were only necessary for Roun, Krai and Kairen knew exactly where to go. By mere luck, the residence was far enough from the Imperial Palace, and both dragons landed in the garden under the servants’ shocked eyes. They could already hear the yells of soldiers outside, ordering the men to gather, most likely Vrehan’s militia.

Shareen and Kairen each jumped down from the dragons first and ran in opposite directions. While the sister took her swords out to go and guard the entrance of the residence, the Prince ran inside.

Kairen couldn’t tell if he was imagining it, but the cries of a baby were guiding him inside the residence. His heart was thumping like crazy in his chest, as he could only

focus on that sound. He finally found a door, and stopped in front of it, almost out of breath. He was suddenly scared to open that door. He listened to the voices inside, almost covered by the baby's screams.

"By the Gods, won't he stop crying. He's been at it for hours and hours, no one has slept a wink since..."

"His mother left! Poor thing... He probably doesn't understand."

Kairen opened the door wide with a bang. The two women turned to face him, scared by the noise and the sudden appearance of that tall man at the door. However, it was hard not to know who that man was. Tall, with his tanned skin, black hair, and black eyes. And that strange hair.

Kairen barely noticed the two women. His eyes fell right on the baby that was there, his eyes all teary and his little fists clenched. He stepped forward, a bit at a loss. This was not how he had imagined their first meeting. None of this was what he wanted, not when his mother wasn't there. The baby had a little hiccup from all his crying earlier. However, his wailing had stopped, and he was only making an upset pout, his eyes riveted on the big man that was coming towards him.

That baby felt ridiculously small compared to Kairen. However, there was no doubt. He had a little patch of dark hair, and skin barely one tone lighter than his own. Kairen hesitated. Then, he slowly took out the little dragon plushie he had on him all this time. The baby's eyes went right for the toy. He opened his hands and stretched a bit to grasp it, holding on tightly to the little plushie his mother had sewn back in shape.

It was a strange situation, but the beginning of a smile appeared on the War God's lips. He gently took his son into his arms, though one hand would have been enough to carry all of him. The baby whined a little bit, squeezing the toy with an upset expression.

"Let's go get your mother back."