

## Chapter 24

As if Kassian had understood his father, the little baby had a very serious frown on and was holding on to the little plushie's tail fiercely. Despite the overall situation, Kairen's heart warmed up a little at that sight. The child was indeed his son...brave and strong, like his parents. He held him for a while as if trying to learn all of his son's features by heart. Kairen had never been interested in children, but Kassian was different. He was truly a part of both of his parents.

Kairen remembered how impatient Cassandra had been to finally see their son and hold him. She only had one week with her baby, while Kairen had lost the entire first week of his newborn's life. Fate truly was too horrible sometimes. He hugged his baby gently. He had never been trained to carry a baby, but somehow, all the right movements came to him naturally, as if his instincts were guiding him. Kassian didn't seem upset being carried in his father's strong and sturdy arms. The baby was actually engrossed with his plushie, though he was barely able to hold on to it. With his little mouth forming O's, he looked like he was sizing up the plushie. His expression was quite amusing.

Kairen couldn't help but recognize some of Cassandra's features there - his little nose, the shape of his eyes. Even his irises had hints of green in them, and his skin was just a shade lighter than his fathers, but not nearly as light as his mother's.

“Oh by the Gods!”

Lady Kareen had just arrived behind him and was staring at the baby, her eyes filled with emotions. The Imperial Concubine's heart melted at the sight of the newborn in Kairen's arms. She seemed at a loss for words, and just gently caressed the baby's hands for a few seconds. From Kairen's arms, the baby squealed in excitement upon seeing a new face. She kept smiling gently at him, but Kairen's mind was elsewhere.

“Mother, take him.”

He carefully passed Kassian to his mother, gave him a little kiss on his head in doing so, and then took out his weapon. It was unfortunate that things were so dire already, as they had very little time for a meaningful reunion. Shareen was guarding the door for now, but Vrehan's men knew where they were. Kairen could hear them outside, banging against every door. It would only be a matter of minutes before they barged in, unless his sister lost patience and went to them first.

“Kyun!”

Kairen almost jumped at the little squeal and looked down. Against his leg, a small, silver-scaled dragon was rubbing its back against him and looking up with big green eyes. The War God smiled once again and leaned down to pick the little dragon up. Kian immediately jumped onto his shoulder, which was broad enough for him to perch on comfortably.

“Oh, by the Great Dragon, he is.. perfect!” exclaimed Lady Kareen on the verge of tears.

Though she wasn't wrong, the new grandmother was already blinded by love. With her knowledge of dragons, she could clearly see Kian was a bit different from all the other dragons she had ever encountered before. He had a longer and leaner body, and his wings were thinner and shorter, too. It was most likely that unless they grew bigger sometime soon, he probably wouldn't be able to manage long flights or heavy weights, like Krai could.

Kairen didn't have time for this, however. Keeping the young dragon on his shoulder, he turned towards the women from before. They might have both been scared of the War God, but at least they did not run away. They were already aware of his tender relationship with Cassandra and Kassian, but he was still an impressive man to see in the flesh.

“Where is Cassandra?” he asked.

“L-Lady Cassandra went to the Imperial Palace,” explained one of the women, who was actually Yasora. “She wanted to find and heal the Emperor.”

“She went alone?” protested Kareen.

“She went with young Lady Missandra!” added Yasora. “They wanted to find one of the herbal gardens or medicines there, as we didn't have time to procure any here.”

“She's not wrong,” sighed Kareen. “That rat, Vrehan, must have had all the Capital's apothecaries watched the second he knew Cassie was back. And then?”

“We...we don't know, Your Highness. The girls left hours ago, and we haven't heard any news since.”

“Hours ago?” exclaimed Kareen, shocked.

She turned to Kairen, livid. Hours ago could mean bad or good news at this point. At least they hadn't found their bodies strung up on the Palace's walls. But in a few hours, they could very well have been caught, tortured, or killed. There might still be a chance the girls were alive, but there was no leaning towards one option over the other.

"Let's go," said Kairen, determined.

Kareen nodded and followed him, still carrying Kassian. There was no way the War God was going to part with his son for a single minute, and the Imperial Concubine could very well protect him herself. They left the room and found Shareen and Anour in the garden, both of them watching the gate, which was still holding against their assailants, though it was obviously having quite a bad day.

"Oh, here's my nephew," said Shareen with a smirk, staring at the baby. "Wow, you're lucky he took after his mom. Even for a baby, he's cute."

"That dragon is amazing," added Anour, his eyes on little Kian. "His tail is so long. He's even leaner than Roun!"

Actually, all three dragons present were quite intrigued by the Baby Dragon. Kian jumped down from Kairen's shoulder and ran to Krai. Though the Black Dragon looked a bit surprised, it carefully walked closer, the big red eyes wide open with curiosity.

To the side, Roun wasn't as patient. The Green Dragon growled, almost jumping on the Baby Dragon, but Krai reacted immediately, growling louder as a warning. The Green Dragon retreated with its head low. Between them, Kian seemed to have not even noticed Roun; The Baby Dragon kept running up to Krai, all excited. The Black Dragon clearly didn't know how to react, especially as the Baby Dragon easily disappeared under its big body. Krai kept trying to look down and around, but the excited Kian kept scuttling over and under, jumping on its paws playfully, making cute squeaks, and chasing Krai's big black tail.

Finally, the big Black Dragon growled and, when Kian made another move close enough, caught the Baby Dragon under its paw. Surprised, Kian squealed a bit, but Krai tilted its head, and carefully grabbed the baby in its mouth. The Baby Dragon swung its little paws, unhappy with this new position, but Krai ignored it as it walked up to Kairen. The dragon looked like a cat with its pissed off kitten, making everyone smile.

"Don't you hurt him, Krai," warned Kareen with a frown.

It was unlikely Krai would harm the Baby Dragon voluntarily, but keeping the baby in its mouth without biting with those sharp fangs must have been quite difficult for Krai, especially as Kian was particularly unruly. However, the Black Dragon looked like it was controlling the situation, and its offspring, perfectly.

They didn't have much time to keep observing these intimate interactions though. The shouts were getting louder behind the door. Kairen cracked his neck, and his sister looked even more impatient. All the servants had run back inside the mansion to hide. A small army was surely waiting for them out there, but these people had Dragon's Blood and actual dragons with them!

"This is going to take all day."

The Princess took a deep breath, taking in as much air as she could into her lungs and, after a couple of seconds, she exhaled a massive fireball towards the door, sending it and everyone behind it flying. The Imperial Princess smirked.

"Now we can actually get to it."

With a demonic smile on her face, she ran into the crowd of soldiers who were still standing or trying to get back up on their feet. Kairen glanced back towards him, but Kassian was perfectly safe in his grandmother's arms. She had even shielded him from the smoke by raising her sleeve, though the baby only seemed to care about his plushie.

The Imperial Prince ran to support his sister. Shareen didn't need much help though, but the faster they dealt with these soldiers, the faster they'd get to the Imperial Palace and to Cassandra. There wasn't a single second to lose.

Behind them, Roun and Krai began jumping to attack the soldiers, too. When Kian started growling at them angrily, Krai finally let go and, though it was too small to attack, the Baby Dragon jumped from its head to its back, sending growls left and right as if it was the one fighting.

The Imperial Siblings fought their way to the Imperial Palace. It was a long, long fight to get there as they couldn't use the dragons with the roofs being trapped. The residence was quite far from the Imperial Palace, and it seemed like the number of men sent by Vrehan was endless. More importantly, they soon realized the Imperial Army was already there. The colors of the soldiers were codified, and Shareen and Kairen didn't even need to talk to each other to know who they were fighting against. They just exchanged glances, and kept going.

Fighting the Imperial Army was not easy inside the Capital, especially not with two dragons by their side. It was the same as the fight against the Eastern Republic's Army. They had to be cautious of the locals, so the dragons couldn't even use their fire. However, Kairen, Shareen, and the two dragons alone were enough to fight their way through the whole Imperial Army, no matter how much slower the progress. The soldiers were obviously afraid of them, though they were trained not to retreat. Kairen and Shareen fought one man after another, slaughtering everyone in their way without stopping.

It was a dance of death. Blood flying through the air and violence dispersing terrified citizens that dared to venture outside at the wrong time. The siblings and the dragons only occupied a couple of streets, but they were a horror scene. They had no mercy and no time to care about doing a clean job of this.

“Your Highness!”

Kairen turned to the left, taking his sword out of a man's chest, soon realizing they weren't alone anymore. Many soldiers of a different outfit were now standing or running in the same direction as them, opposing the Imperial Army. One of the Generals ran to Kairen's side, bowing with a military salute.

“Your East Army!” exclaimed Shareen, surprised. “Already?”

“We came as soon as we got Lady Kareen's message, Your Highness! We couldn't stay put, especially with Your Highness and Lady Cassandra in danger!”

Indeed, they soon heard the sounds of the two armies fighting resonating from all the nearby streets. The fight had now been taken much farther into the Capital's streets. Screams and sounds of weapons striking filled the air. It was a war scene everywhere the eye could see.

Kairen and Shareen exchanged a smile in spite of their tiredness and the sweat and blood soaking their armor. With the East Army here, they could finally cut through the smaller fights and make it to the Imperial Palace quicker.

The fighting resumed, more violent than before. Throughout the city, hundreds of men fought to get to the Imperial Palace or keep others from it. The fighting going into the night, long past sunset. When the sun had touched the ground, they finally presented themselves at the Palace's doors. The fight wasn't over, but the siblings had finally reached their destination. Both Shareen and Kairen were a bit tired after all of that, but neither of them wanted to stop. They sent people to get Phetra, their hostage, and cleared the area around them, making sure no one would try to stop them from

entering. In the streets, the East Army was clearly winning, establishing a clear perimeter around the Palace. Unlike the East Army, none of the Imperial Army had been trained in first aid, and they had to watch as Kairen's men helped their own people, while theirs suffered.

What was happening in the streets was no longer Kairen's concern. He was glaring at the doors, impatient to finally wrap his hands around Vrehan's neck. He glanced at his sister, who nodded. Just like before, Shareen took a deep breath, and used her fire on the large doors. It was the most efficient way and, after that, both siblings only had to use a bit of strength on the doors for them to finally collapse.

Leaving the armies to fight each other outside, they walked in. Kareen followed a few steps behind with Evin and Anour as bodyguards, even though she probably didn't need them.

"Where to, Mother?" asked Kairen, unsure.

"I don't know... Let's just head for the rat's apartments first."

As they walked through the corridors, everything felt quiet. Strangely quiet. They'd had to leave the dragons outside, as both Roun and Krai were too big to squeeze through the front doors, but it was still too quiet. dragons or not. They didn't spot a single servant for a long while. The Imperial Palace had certainly changed a lot since their last visit here, and none of them were particularly fond of this new atmosphere.

"Brother?"

Kairen followed her glare. They were still on their way, but something strange was happening to the side. Several Imperial Soldiers were guarding the lake, their weapons in hand. The siblings exchanged a glance. Men guarding the lake? They decided to ignore it and, instead, continued rushing inside when a loud sound resonated. A long, long blow. Kareen froze.

"The Emperor," she whispered.

They all knew that sound. It was only used in the event of an Imperial Death. Their blood froze in their veins, and without thinking, Shareen and Kairen started running towards the Emperor's Hall.

When they barged in, they were welcomed with a hundred soldiers pointing their weapons at them. The Hall was filled with Imperial soldiers and at the very end, facing them, Vrehan sat on the Golden Throne, his dragon sitting behind him. Both of

the red beast's eyes were completely destroyed, they were just two big black holes now. It was obviously blind.

However, the dragon wasn't their main worry at the moment and neither were the soldiers. In front of them, Vrehan was holding Missandra by her hair, a knife threateningly held against her throat.

A strange silence followed their arrival into the room. Kairen and Vrehan were fiercely glaring at each other from across the dozens of soldiers between them. Even if they had been alone, the atmosphere wouldn't have gotten an inch colder. The poor men stuck between the two Imperial Princes even felt a bit out of place, exchanging worried glances at each other. After all, none of them had signed up to be standing up against the Empire's War God himself! Those men were Imperial Guards, trained to obey the Emperor only, and they would do so until their death, but this situation just didn't feel right for any of them. Princess Shareen, who was known for her own military merits, was glaring at them like she was looking at a crowd of vermin. She couldn't believe the nerve of those idiots to side with Vrehan.

The Imperial Princess had a sour expression on her face. She had abandoned her sword to steal a spear from one of the Imperial Generals she had defeated. That weapon was heavy and meant for a man, but she had no problem carrying it nonchalantly on her shoulders. Her stare went to Missandra with a sigh. So things had turned that bad here. Anour, too, was staring at Missandra non-stop, unable to say a word, only feeling scared for her.

"You're a bit late, Brother," said Vrehan, speaking first. "You missed my coronation."

Kairen didn't bother to answer, but Shareen stood forward, furious.

"What coronation?! You're no more worthy of the title of Emperor than you are worthy of putting your dirty ass on that throne, Vrehan!"

Her words angered him, and he suddenly pulled more on Missandra's hair, making her groan in pain. She was keeping herself from crying, but the young woman was teary-eyed, as he was keeping her neck bent in a weird position, and the blade was held against her skin. Shareen clenched her teeth, annoyed. If he had captured Missandra, it didn't mean anything good for her sister either. Anour almost stepped forward, but Shareen quickly held his arm and pushed him back towards her mother.

"What happened to the old man?" suddenly asked Kareen.

For the first time, her voice was cold as ice, but she was strangely calm and composed. The Second Prince answered with an annoyed expression.

“He is dead. I am the Emperor now. You’re no longer the favorite!”

This was such a weak insult, it wouldn’t make the proud Imperial Concubine flinch. Kareen’s glare was much fiercer, and it looked like nothing could make her waiver, not even the news of her past lover’s death. Either she didn’t believe it, she hid her emotions perfectly, or she wasn’t affected, one couldn’t tell. She was just standing there, an empty look in her eyes.

From glaring at the concubine, Vrehan’s eyes went down to the baby she was holding. His black eyes opened wider, in a horrified, disgusted expression as he discovered Kassian. Kairen moved right away to stand between Vrehan’s line of sight and his son, glaring right back at him.

“That little bastard,” hissed Vrehan.

Kian who had followed them jumped on Kairen’s shoulder at that moment, and growled at him, arching its back.

“Where is Cassandra?” asked Kairen, impatient.

This time, the Second Prince’s face broke into a nasty smile, looking quite happy. He chuckled, but it soon turned into a crazy laugh. His voice echoed along the walls, making everyone but him rather uneasy.

“You crazy ass,” hissed Shareen.

“She’s dead!” yelled the Second Prince.

Kairen didn’t move, but his fingers tightened around his weapon.

“Your damn, precious witch is dead! That bitch killed herself to escape me!”

“You’re lying,” muttered Shareen.

She couldn’t help but send worried glances at Kairen. If Cassandra was really dead, her brother was really going to lose it. Facing them, Vrehan kept laughing like crazy, amused by the War God’s furious expression.

“You were a War God, Kairen, but now you’re so affected by that bitch’s death? Well, your woman is dead. She dove into the lake and she never came back.”

“It’s Cassandra, Kairen,” whispered Kareen behind him. “She can stay underwater for a long time.”

“Oh, you think she could still be alive? I will break it to you, she is not coming back, you idiot. Your women dove into that lake hours ago. Even that witch can’t survive hours under the surface! It’s a pity. I would have loved to show you her dead body, just for the pleasure of seeing your face.”

Whatever he had hoped to see, Kairen wasn’t going to give him that pleasure. Whether he believed it or not, and despite his sister’s worried glances, all of his rage was contained inside. However, they did hear the furious growls of a dragon coming from the outside. Unlike Kairen, Krai was going rogue outside the Palace’s walls. Yet here, its Master was only clenching his jaw and his fists and glaring like a tiger at Vrehan.

He slowly raised his sword.

“You’re going to die,” he whispered.

That simple sentence erased all smiles from Vrehan’s lips. The Second Prince stood up, and directed their attention towards Missandra. His blade against her throat was tracing a thin red line on her skin. Shareen clicked her tongue.

“Oh, no, I don’t think so. You are going to throw your weapons, or I’ll slice this woman like a pig in front of you. Both of you,” he added, glaring at Shareen as well.

“You scum. And what happens if we refuse? You only have one hostage, once she’s dead we would have no problem killing you!”

“Oh, I don’t need to kill her straight away,” chuckled Vrehan. “I can slice her pretty skin, little by little, until you obey. Her skin is way too neat, compared to her older sister’s, isn’t it? I could even chop off a few limbs.”

“We have Phetra,” declared Shareen. “How about we do the same thing to your precious younger sister?”

Vrehan laughed loudly again, his horrible laugh making Shareen roll her eyes.

“Do you think I care about my sister? She was only useful for some time! Princesses aren’t as watched as the Princes, you see. She was very helpful in making more allies within the Senate.”

“I knew that bitch opened her legs,” hissed Shareen.

“You two are such idiots,” continued Vrehan. “All you can do is fight, you are not fit to be the Emperor!”

“Oh, right, we are not some vile scheming rat like you!”

Just as she said that Vrehan got even madder, and his dragon growled furiously, too, taking one step forward. They couldn't have missed his eyes, both completely covered in a dry dark liquid that ought to be blood.

“Your dragon doesn't look in top shape, Vrehan,” snickered Shareen.

That sentence didn't help make him any calmer, and without warning, he suddenly raised his weapon and carved a long, deep line down Missandra's arm. The young woman screamed in pain, closing her eyes and crying out.

“You bastard!” screamed Shareen

“Keep making me mad, Shareen. I still have plenty of surfaces to keep going on this little bitch's body!”

That's when Kairen recognized the weapon Vrehan was holding. It was Cassandra's dagger, the one that formerly belonged to Phetra. This time, the War God saw red and stepped forward. However, Vrehan was quick to react and put his knife back against Missandra's throat.

“Uh-uh, no, Kairen. If you take another step, I swear I'll butcher that little bitch!”

The Third Prince stood there for a second, his eyes on the young girl. Missandra was crying in pain, her blood dripping from her injury. That bastard had cut her deep on purpose, to make her injury more painful and impressive. He didn't want to give him any victory, but she was still Cassandra's younger sister. He glanced at the blind dragon and snickered. He threw his weapons.

The two swords resonated on the marble floor, and even the soldiers in front of him looked confused. The War God was giving up on his weapons, to save a woman? Behind him, Shareen was just as annoyed, but after hesitating, she was about to throw her spear when Missandra spoke.

“Don't! Please don't care about me! I'd rather die than let this scum survive!”

“Missandra!” called out Anour, horrified, a second too late.

“Shut up, little vermin! Or I shall cut you some more!”

Vrehan put his threat to execution right away, stabbing Missandra’s shoulder. She screamed again, and fell down on her knees, in a horrible state of pain. Her voice resonated throughout the Palace’s walls, making even the soldiers uncomfortable. This situation was really not one they wanted to be in.

Meanwhile, Shareen’s hands were almost turning white from holding her spear so tightly. In her head, she was already going over the scenarios of what she’d do to that scum once he was dead. Next to her, Anour was the most horrified. The young boy looked like he was about to faint, his eyes on Missandra, completely shocked. He couldn’t do anything but watch the horrible display of violence against her.

“Vrehan, enough!” yelled Kareen.

“Shareen still has her weapon,” he retorted, staring at his half-sister.

“Don’t!”

To everyone’s surprise, despite her tears, Missandra still looked fierce and determined. Down on her knees, holding her bleeding shoulder, her lips trembling, she was still able to look at Shareen from across the hall. The girl ought to be in an excruciating state of pain, but she still acted as if she wasn’t.

“D-don’t,” she begged. “Don’t let that bastard win.”

“Shut up, I said!” he yelled.

Vrehan kicked her injury and pressed his shoe on it, forcing Missandra to bow lower and lower, in a horrible position. His shoe sole was soon completely red, but the girl did not avert her eyes from the little group across the room. Never had she looked so much like her older sister.

“That bastard murdered my sister and raped his own sister!”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“He did what?”

This time, even Kareen looked utterly shocked and baffled.

“You rotten rat. What did you do?” muttered Shareen.

“I said shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!” yelled Vrehan, absolutely furious.

He kicked Missandra relentlessly until the girl was completely lying underneath him, half-conscious.

A heavy silence followed that horrible scene. Even if he hadn't said a thing, Vrehan's anger at the girl's words made the truth obvious. Everyone in that hall could understand that.

Suddenly, Kian squealed, and jumped down Kairen's arm, running in the opposite direction, leaving the room.

“Kian, no!”

“Lady Kareen!”

The Baby Dragon disappeared into the corridors, while Lady Kareen ran after it, still holding Kassian. Evin immediately ran after her, too. He didn't have his place in a fight against so many soldiers anyway, and the Imperial Servant was concerned about Cassandra's baby. Anour glanced at them leaving, hesitant.

“Go with them,” said Kairen, his eyes still glaring in Vrehan's way.

His younger brother hesitated. He wasn't comfortable letting their mother and the babies run away, but War God or not, Kairen was in an unfavorable position there. Moreover, he had already thrown his weapon, and Anour knew he and Shareen wouldn't risk Missandra getting killed either. Vrehan was a poor fighter, but he still had his dragon. Yet, he had trouble leaving. When Missandra was like that.

“Are you sure?” he whispered.

Kairen didn't answer, which was the equivalent of a definite answer from him. Shareen gave him a nod, too. Anour swallowed his saliva, a bit bitter to have to leave them. However, he wasn't stupid. He wasn't on his older siblings' level, he would have been no more than a hindrance here. After one last glare towards Vrehan, trying not to look at the injured Missandra, Anour finally ran out, to catch up to Lady Kareen. Once he was gone, the War God and his sister were suddenly left alone with an army of Imperial Soldiers, Vrehan, and his dragon.

Shareen sighed.

“About two hundred men? Really, Vrehan, you're such a coward.”

“Drop your weapon, Shareen, and recognize me as the Emperor,” hissed the Second Prince. “Or I swear I’ll finish this girl and you’ll have to watch her bleed out!”

Shareen glanced down at Missandra. The young girl was still not moving, one couldn’t tell if she was still breathing. Only her eyes were still teary, turned towards them. After a few seconds of staring at each other, she very distinctly saw Missandra nod.

Shareen sighed.

“You’re not too rusty yet, Brother?” she said, her eyes on Vrehan, making her spear turn between her hands.

“Stop playing.”

She snickered. Suddenly, her eyes went up on the Red Dragon.

“Enough!” yelled Vrehan, feeling what was going to happen. “I am the new Emperor! The council already agreed! You can’t kill me, I am the Emperor!”

Shareen laughed.

“Oh, Vrehan, you’re really the Emperor of rats. The Council you said? You convinced a bunch of scum like you to sign some paperwork, and just like that, you think we should leave you Father’s throne? Don’t worry about the council. I think it will be time for some serious spring cleaning once we are done with you!”

Vrehan’s eyes opened wide, and he stepped back. Shareen was still smiling like a cat about to eat a bird.

“You know what? I think we need fresh blood on the Council’s seat. How about we start with yours?!”

Just like that, she suddenly threw her spear across the room. Her weapon flew far above the head of the soldiers and, with a horrible sound, dug deep in the Red Dragon’s shoulder.

The gigantic beast growled furiously in pain and anger and jumped to attack, coming their way. The first ranks of soldiers, distracted by the dragon, turned their heads back a second too late. They met Kairen’s furious glare from extremely up close, and a second later, the War God’s fist began wreaking havoc around him.