

Chapter 25

Cassandra slowly woke up to the sound of something dripping next to her. She suddenly felt a horrible sensation in her throat and started coughing out some water, almost suffocating as she was trying to get some air back. She felt exhausted, and a bit dizzy, though she was lying down. Underneath her was something cold... and wet. It wasn't very comfortable either. She struggled to move her body, pushing on her numb arms to help herself sit up. Her hands met with the cold rocky ground. Cassandra coughed a little, spitting some water again. She felt exhausted, but her instincts quickly reminded her of the dangerous situation.

She sat up, looking around anxiously. She had no idea where she was, but somehow, the presence of light disturbed her. Her memories were slowly coming back, and she was almost sure she had lost consciousness in the deep, dark waters of the lake in the Imperial Palace. So the question was, where was she now? Against all expectations, she was alive, but with no idea where she had ended up.

As her eyes got used to the blinding light coming from above, Cassandra slowly realized she was surrounded by rock walls. In all shades of grey, sometimes silverish, the undefined walls of this cave were making a semi-sphere above her head. She could still hear water clearly dripping all around her. How far was she under the surface level? If there was this much light, she couldn't be too deep.

She barely had any strength left and wished to remain seated, but somehow, she couldn't just stay still either. How had she even gotten here? A few meters away from her, there was what looked like a large pond, or a little lake. It was completely still and quiet, and everything else was echoing inside the cave. She could almost hear her own heartbeat echoing. Cassandra realized her body was cold, but not as wet as someone who had just gotten out of the water. How long had she been here? She was completely at a loss and even more panicked due to that. What happened to Opheus and Missandra? What about the Old Emperor?

Her head was aching a little bit. She touched her forehead and felt a vivid pain. It was a bit swollen. So she had bumped her head in something, causing the headache. Cassandra sighed. What had she gotten herself into this time? She looked around, trying to look for the creature from before, just in case, but she was obviously completely alone. After much effort, she finally got back on her feet. She was in a poor state. Her legs and arms were covered in bruises as if she had been dragged

around on that same rocky ground. Cassandra looked at the water again. Had she been taken out of there and how? By whom? She was obviously alone here.

She tried to walk to the walls, checking if there wasn't some opening she may have missed. It was all stones, ground, ceiling and walls alike... thousands of little stones, and she couldn't see all of the different levels of the wall. It was sharp too, but some had iridescent reflections, like pink or blue. They almost looked like dark gemstones.

Cassandra's eyes were attracted to the light above again. What she had taken for a bright light was actually some long slit in the ceiling, letting in what was most likely natural light. Cassandra squinted her eyes, trying to see anything. She was almost sure she had seen some movement up there. Was she actually that close to the ground surface?

Suddenly, something moved in the water. She retreated towards the wall as a reflex, but there was nowhere to run. Slowly, scales started appearing at the surface. Cassandra felt her blood go cold again. She could see parts of the body undulate in the water and surface at some places like a snake swimming around. How big was it really? She had been unable to see the whole body in the water, but now, she could see it move in so many places, she was only starting to get the reality of this creature's real size. Then, the head slowly merged out of the water. First, the two horns she had seen, one of them broken at half its length. Then, the silver eyes appeared. They were so clear. If it wasn't clearly staring at her, Cassandra would have wondered if it wasn't actually blind. Then, the nose and maw came out of the water, dripping. She tried to keep breathing normally, but no matter how she looked at it, this creature was part dragon.

A very, very large and strange dragon. With an elongated head and neck, there was plenty of space for the many gills moving with each breath the creature took. Cassandra didn't even know if she should have been surprised, scared, or amazed, but she was all of that at the same time. The dragon let out a long, high-pitched growl that echoed along the cave's walls, and more of its body came out.

The front limbs weren't anything like what she had seen before. She had thought they were short, but unlike the dragons' short paws, those were longer and more retractable. They were obviously half-way between arms and fins. Even the "fingers" of the creature had curved claws and were tied together with webbing. It didn't actually use its limbs to move around, his body was crawling almost like a snake. Cassandra retreated further, not even daring to blink for one second. She felt like her own breathing was way too loud.

The creature didn't lose her for a second. It was completely focused on her as it was coming out of the water, more and more of its body crawling out. Cassandra had wrongly judged its size. If she had to compare it with the dragons she had seen before, its head was about as big as Glahad's, but there was no real comparison in terms of its body. It would have been like comparing a cat to a snake. While its neck was very thick, the rest of its body didn't grow in size at all. It was all the same width, but very, very long. It felt like the end was never coming, and the body almost had to spiral onto itself to find enough space, as Cassandra kept retreating further and further away.

She was grateful the cave was so vast, because there were few rooms inside the Imperial Palace that could have welcomed this creature comfortably. How old was this creature to have gotten so big? Its body was meters and meters long! When she finally spotted the little legs, she realized those were in no way meant to walk either, but just to stabilize the end of the body. They were thinner and shorter than the front paws.

Finally, the tail came out, almost ridiculously little and simple compared to the rest of that majestic creature. Cassandra was at a loss for words as they were just staring at each other. This thing was not a dragon as the Dragon Empire knew them. It was something similar, maybe a related species. Cassandra exhaled, realizing she had been holding her breath for a while now. Thank the Gods, this creature wasn't menacing at all. It only stared, and had only growled once, if it was a growl.

Cassandra had seen much scarier dragons, so she wasn't exactly afraid...more cautious. She could tell when a beast was angry or menacing, and that creature wasn't either of those. She highly suspected it had actually saved her life by bringing her here, which showed a high form of intelligence.

She decided to take a slow step forward, to see how the creature would react. It didn't seem panicked in any way, and actually, came gently to her. She could see its thin nostrils moving a bit, smelling her. Cassandra suddenly realized what the shimmering on its scales was, it had been disturbing her for a while now. Salt! Was that water salty? Could it be linked to the actual sea? The creature kept moving its iridescent scales and, just like its size, Cassandra had been wrong about its color as well. It wasn't dark, but actually more of a shimmery grey. There were some other colors shimmering in the light, making her think those scales were opal-like. Just like the stones of that cave. Was this the Creature's lair?

An idea was beginning to grow in Cassandra's mind, and somehow, she started to really believe in it. She remembered what she had been taught when she was much,

much younger. She hesitated, putting an arm out and extending her hand, though she was a bit scared and probably crazy to do so.

The Creature didn't try to sniff it as Krai would have. Instead, it slid its long body past it, making Cassandra touch its strange, polished scales. She chuckled, impressed. The Creature began circling around her, making one, then two rings with its body, keeping Cassandra inside. It still wasn't menacing, but she felt like it was establishing some sort of protection around her. Cassandra smiled.

"I think I know who you are," she whispered, amazed.

The Creature didn't react to her words, but after taking a deep breath, the young woman started singing.

She used her native tongue, careful about her voice and her words, and sang the Mermaid's Requiem. After listening to her for a few seconds, the Creature started singing a high-pitched song too. It sounded like a wind blowing against some glass, a high-pitched but gentle sound. When she was done, the creature put its head closer to her, and after a slight hesitation, Cassandra gently caressed its head. Her heart was beating like crazy, almost certain she was right. All the legends from her childhood were taking form in this amazing creature in front of her.

"You're really... the Water God," she whispered.

She was overwhelmed with emotion, almost to the point of crying. She had never questioned its existence, but having the deity-like being right next to her was an amazing sensation. The creature sang softly again, making Cassandra chuckle, a tear escaping her eye. She took a deep breath.

Though it was a beautiful moment, she didn't have much time for that. She couldn't forget the crisis that was going on outside this cave, and how her family needed her. She extended her arm to caress the scales again.

"I need your help," she whispered in her native tongue. "I really need to get back to the others... to my family."

She wasn't sure he would understand her, but just then, the creature looked up, at the long slit in the ceiling. Just as she thought, there was something up there. The exact moment when Cassandra looked up, she very clearly saw a shadow for a second. What was that?

"Kyun!"

Cassandra jumped, as the Baby Dragon suddenly jumped out of the water, flapping it's little wings and chasing the water.

“Kian? How did you get here?”

She ran to the Baby Dragon, who happily jumped in her arms with many little squeaks. Kian kept rubbing its head against her chest while Cassandra looked at the pond again. This was definitely connected to the lake somehow! If so, how deep and wide was the lake under the surface, and beneath which room could it have spread?

“Kyuuuu...”

Kian seemed to have just noticed the gigantic Creature, and very boldly jumped from Cassandra's arm to run to it. Without any fear, the little dragon hopped onto the first ring of the body, under the Creature's eyes. Its white eyes were on Kian with a bit of interest, watching the Baby Dragon's moves. Kian jumped higher, onto the second and higher ring, and glanced at Cassandra. Was he showing off? She tried to call Kian, but the little dragon ignored her and turned to the head of the body it had just climbed.

The Water God seemed interested in the Baby Dragon and brought it's head closer, sniffing it. However, a sniff from such a big creature was like a gust of wind to Kian, and the tiny dragon was pushed away. Just as Cassandra feared it might fall, the dragon started flapping its little wings and looked up. Now that she saw them together, there was a bit of resemblance in their body shape, though Kian was still more like Krai.

“Kyun!”

The Baby Dragon started flying higher, looking suddenly attracted to that slit in the ceiling. The Water God, looking curious about the Baby Dragon, followed its flight up, extending its body to raise it. Cassandra immediately saw her chance. With a silent apology, she climbed on the creature's body just like Kian had done before. She was bigger than the Baby Dragon, but still no bigger than a kitten compared to the gigantic water creature. If it felt her climbing on its scales, it didn't show any discomfort at all. Cassandra struggled to keep going, with her aching muscles, overall exhaustion, and the climb that was becoming more and more vertical and abrupt. Whatever was above them, she silently prayed it wasn't going to be another terrible place to fall into.

Just when she had finally climbed past the second ring, she realized she wouldn't be able to climb up the “neck” of the creature. Just then, it seemed to finally spot her, and

before she could do anything, it pushed her up onto its head. Leaving Cassandra hanging on by its horns! Cassandra couldn't help but let out a little scream in fear, but Kian apparently took it for an excited cry, and made a similar high-pitched noise, all happy and flying around her.

The creature kept going higher, understanding her goal, and Kian's. As they finally reached the breach, Cassandra realized it would be just large enough to let her through, but there was no way the creature could follow her. She bit her lip, and Kian jumped through the crack above her, disappearing between the two edges. She was worried for a few seconds, but then, she heard the dragon happily squeak from somewhere above. With a sigh of relief, she found a grip as soon as she could, ready to climb up. Just then, she looked at the creature, whose eyes were very close. She smiled at it.

"Thank you," she whispered, and then, with a push from the creature's head, she climbed up.

Despite the creature's push, Cassandra struggled to reach the upper level. She was really tired, hurting all over, and not sure about what she should expect next. She just hoped that the crack in the ceiling wasn't going to lead her into another deadly trap. She had almost died too many times today already. The only reason she was feeling a little bit better was Kian. Though she had no idea how it had found her and gotten there, the little dragon being all jumpy and fine meant Kassian ought to be safe and sound somewhere out there as well.

Cassandra had no idea how long she had stayed unconscious when she was with the Water God, but she felt like it had been a few hours at least. She hoped things had progressed up there, and in a good way at that. She was silently dying to see Kairen again. Cassandra didn't want to get her hopes up too soon, but she hoped he was somewhere near. She had that strange conviction in her heart that the War God had returned to the Capital.

"Kyun!"

"I'm coming," she sighed, trying to pull herself up and catch up with the excited Baby Dragon.

She had no idea what to expect once she had climbed out of that breach, but anyway, she wouldn't have been able to imagine it. This looked like another cave, only much, much bigger. It was actually carved to have a roughly square shape. The walls were definitely made of the same material as the one below, though, that shining grey

stone. Cassandra had no idea what it was, and she couldn't remember having seen anything similar within the Palace's walls. So, where in the world were they?

She felt a bit too tired to stand, and remained seated to look at her surroundings. Kian was already happily running around and sniffing everything with curious eyes. The much bigger cave continued past her line of sight, as if she had emerged at one end of it. More curiously, she noticed some strange, black spherical shapes. A lot of them were broken open, and looked as if they could crumble and fall into dust at any second. Stones? Their shape was a bit intriguing, and Kian too kept sniffing them with curious eyes.

Everything there was really quiet, but Cassandra could hear some sort of faint wind coming from the other side. The light was coming from a little hole in the ceiling, too. This was definitely sunlight, and this opening was too round to be a natural one. Who would have carved a window in a cave, and why? In any case, it was too high for Kian to carry her up there, and actually, she wasn't even sure it would be wide enough for her to get through. The distance was blurred with all her surroundings looking like the same rocky walls.

She finally stood up, and the Baby Dragon immediately ran back to her to rub its body against her leg, almost like a cat. Kian was apparently determined to stay around her, and though the dragon kept venturing everywhere to have a look, it was coming back to her every ten seconds or so. Since the young dragon looked so fearless and enthusiastic, Cassandra walked further into the cave, intrigued. There was nothing but those countless, countless broken spheres. She couldn't understand what they were. They were not made of the same material as the stones, they were darker, but gave off a similar feeling to the Onyx Castle.

As she kept walking, the echo of her own steps made her slowly realize how big this new cave actually was. Unlike the one from before, this one seemed to continue for miles, like some tube just getting wider and wider. The breach she had come out of was already far behind her when she found another window above her, throwing light on more bigger, broken spheres. She suddenly realized she had been wrong. Those things weren't spheres. They were empty shells.

Now that she could see some more complete ones, the shape wasn't so round and was similar to Kian's dragon egg. She hadn't noticed before because even the material looked different, and none looked alive or illuminated like Krai's egg once was. She was baffled. What were those dragon eggs doing here? There were hundreds of them! Some looked so old they were almost turning into stones.

The Baby Dragon squealed, sniffing one of the eggs and putting its little front paws on it to look inside, but Cassandra grabbed the dragon and carried it instead. Somehow, she didn't like the idea of Kian playing with empty dragon shells. This whole place felt like... some kind of cemetery. There was a really uneasy feeling growing in her heart from seeing those empty shells. From the looks of those, they must have belonged to dragons that lived years and years ago, maybe centuries.

Cassandra kept walking, and as her arms got tired, Kian jumped out of them to walk ahead. However, this time the Baby Dragon didn't look as curious anymore. It actually had its wings close to its body, and looked more cautious than before. Was Kian feeling something she didn't? Cassandra hoped they wouldn't encounter anything too dangerous in here. She kept trying to understand the Emperor's purpose. Did he know she would find the Water God in the lake and understand what the Creature was? Did he even know about it? Or was he hoping she'd find that breach and get here? She hoped the old man was alright.

“Kyuuu?”

Kian had stopped, looking a bit wary of whatever was ahead. Cassandra caught up to the baby dragon with a frown, and indeed, there was a noticeable change in their surroundings. The eggs around them were considerably bigger, and unlike the previous ones, they still had some color on them. They were getting closer to the end of the strange tunnel, she could feel it.

Cassandra was starting to realize where they were standing. She had forgotten about this place, actually. Suddenly, Kian froze, before running back towards her and hiding behind her leg. Something was scaring the baby dragon? It wasn't growling, but the emerald eyes were focused on something right after the next turn. Cassandra walked towards it. The wind she had heard before was getting louder, and coming in little waves. It wasn't wind, but breathing.

They were finally met with an impressive mountain of golden scales.

“Glahad!” she exclaimed.

What was the Emperor's dragon doing there? Recognizing the magnificent creature, Cassandra ran to it, but the gigantic dragon looked uninterested. The dragon was curled upon itself, its ruby eyes half-open, looking incredibly passive. It didn't even seem to care about them, and barely reacted. Seeing that Cassandra wasn't scared, Kian came out and carefully scurried over to look. The difference in size between the two was impressive. Kian was like a big cat, while Glahad was like a little mountain by itself.

The Baby Dragon kept looking around the giant dragon and poking at it curiously. However, the older one didn't seem to care. Cassandra realized Glahad was in some way Kian's grandfather, but the Golden Dragon looked completely disinterested in anything. It was so calm that Cassandra had no fear approaching it.

"Glahad, what is it?" she asked.

Giving no answer, its ruby eyes shifted to her, without any other kind of reaction. It looked like the Golden Dragon was...depressed. That realization carved a hole in Cassandra's heart, as a scary thought sprouted in her mind. She shook her head, choking up a little, and tried to look around. There was nothing else but empty dragon shells here. This was definitely the Emperor's Dragon Vault, but what was Glahad doing there?

Abandoning the old dragon for a few seconds, Cassandra made the detour around its body, which occupied half of the way, to check what was around the other side. She gasped.

A gigantic door. It was made with the same stones as all the walls there, but the square shape and the gigantic handle on it couldn't be mistaken. Cassandra was amazed. So they really were in the dragon's vault! Didn't Shareen say before that this place was right behind the Throne room? Meaning they were just a few steps away from getting back inside the Imperial Palace! Cassandra hurried over, but she couldn't even understand how to open the door. The handle was way too heavy! She couldn't even move it at all, how was she supposed to pull on it? She suddenly realized this was how the Imperial Family members were the only ones who could get in. It took superhuman strength to get that lock open... or a dragon's help. Lady Kareen was human, yet she had been in here before to retrieve Kian's egg. She couldn't have done it by herself. However, with the help of a dragon, she could have.

Cassandra turned back to the Emperor's dragon. Would Glahad help her? Opening that door would be a matter of seconds for a dragon, but how to convince it to help?

She walked over. Kian, a bit lost by her back-and-forth, decided to sit down and tilt its head, observing her movements. Cassandra didn't have time to worry about what Kian was doing, she just went back to face the Golden Dragon's head. She knew Glahad wasn't going to hurt her, as the Emperor did like her. Would the dragon help her? She wasn't sure of the situation outside, but it was very probable Glahad had somehow been forced in here. This was the Emperor's dragon, though. Even if the dragon was locked in here, it was the only one strong enough to break out. Glahad just needed the will to do so.

“Glahad, please, you have to help me get out of here,” she said.

This time, there was no movement. The Golden Dragon looked like it had absolutely no intention of doing anything. Even if it was depressed, Glahad couldn't simply stay here! Cassandra walked closer, desperate.

“Glahad! I don't know what happened to His Highness, but...”

This time, the Golden Dragon growled as a warning, its ruby eyes opening wide. Cassandra jumped back in surprise. She wasn't prepared for the Emperor's dragon to actually get mad at her once she'd mention The Emperor. Kian, upset at Glahad's growling, jumped between her and its dragon ancestor and growled back. Its attempts to growl were once again no more than a kitten's meow compared to the fierce growl of a proper adult dragon. Still, it at least got Glahad's attention.

“But you can't abandon Kairen,” continued Cassandra, careful with her words. “You know he is the... the favorite son, the one that should take the Golden Throne. He and Shareen ought to be out there. You can't let Vrehan and Lephys do this!”

Despite her plea, the Golden Dragon didn't move much. At least, Glahad kept both scarlet eyes on her, looking like it was listening, but not reacting much. Cassandra was desperate. She wasn't even sure how much Glahad understood her words. Krai had always seemed able to understand her, but maybe the Black Dragon was just imitating its Master and reacting to her words. Cassandra wasn't sure of anything anymore, but she glanced down at Kian. Kassian was in danger out there, and so was his father. Maybe convincing the Golden Dragon was the last chance to save them.

“Glahad! You know the Emperor didn't want this!”

The Golden Dragon resumed its furious growling, but despite her fear, Cassandra continued.

“You can't stay here and do nothing. Kairen needs you, Shareen too. The Emperor has a new grandson, Kassian, my son, and you can't let him die!”

This time, the dragon stopped growling, apparently having heard her. Cassandra grabbed Kian off the floor, though the Baby Dragon was still fearlessly growling at Glahad.

“You have to help me get out of here, please. Vrehan will kill them! Kairen, Shareen, even Prince Opheus, Prince Anour, and Lady Kareen, too!”

Having heard about the Imperial Concubine, Glahad finally raised its head, making Cassandra sigh in relief. The Emperor's love for Lady Kareen may save their lives, after all! Her name had definitely made the dragon react.

"I know... I know His Highness wanted Lady Kareen to be safe. He loved her, and wherever she was, he was fine with it because she was safe, right? As long as Vrehan is out there, she won't be safe anymore, Glahad. You can't give up on the one love His Highness wanted to protect."

The dragon suddenly emitted a long higher-pitched sound that sounded like a wailing to Cassandra. She was actually crying. She didn't want to admit the Emperor may be dead, but the thought was making its way in reluctantly. So many things were pushing her towards it, no matter how much she didn't want it to be true. She wasn't ready to hear it, neither was Glahad, and yet the Golden Dragon knew.

"Glahad, please..."

With a growl, the Golden Dragon finally moved. Glahad's humongous body slowly rose up, and Kian made itself very small in Cassandra's arms, obviously impressed and scared. Glahad was incredibly big, and once the dragon was standing, its body occupied more than half of the space there. Cassandra had to retreat against the wall to not risk being crushed. It seemed like Glahad knew exactly what to do. The Golden Dragon turned around, its ruby eyes going to the gigantic door. Cassandra couldn't imagine how Glahad had been made to stay here, but she doubted there was anything that could efficiently contain the most powerful creature in this Empire.

The Golden Dragon growled and raised a paw to grab the giant handle. Due to the size of its claws, only two of them could pull, but still, the dragon had no trouble lifting it, unlike Cassandra had earlier. She felt a wave of hope as the door started making an awful ruckus from the pressure. However, it wasn't moving so easily. After a few seconds, it became obvious Glahad had to use considerable strength to try and open it. Something was blocking it, but the Golden Dragon was not giving up. It started growling furiously, determined.

"Come on, Glahad... Please," whispered Cassandra.

In her arms, Kian started cheering too with excited little growls and squeaks, its eyes riveted on the adult dragon. Glahad struggled more and more. The dragon growled furiously against that door that was not opening, and it kept pulling. Cassandra was worried to see the base of one claw starting to bleed, but Glahad wouldn't stop. The old dragon kept using all of its strength, arching its back and putting all of its body

into it. Cassandra felt the tension as if she had been pulling too, and silently cheered, praying that this was going to work. Finally, the door moved.

Strangely, an awful noise was heard. The sound of something massive and heavy resonated in the vault, and Cassandra had to protect her ears. Yet, Glahad growled even more furiously, pulling the handle even more. The Golden Dragon was determined, and the door was still resisting, but it was almost done. Cassandra could finally see the opening. Jumping at her feet, Kian chirped excitedly and ran to jump on the Golden Dragon's back. The little dragon climbed up the body that was at least ten times bigger than its own, peeking at what was going on behind the door.

Kian suddenly made another one of those high-pitched sounds, and in a split second, Cassandra saw the baby dragon jump and fly away into the small space.

"Kian!" she called, too late.

Where had it gone? Cassandra didn't like losing her son's dragon, she was scared something would happen to it. She knew that door had to open up to somewhere behind the Emperor's giant Golden Throne. However, soon enough, she heard another furious growling, and this time, it wasn't coming from Glahad. She froze, but those growls were coming from wherever Kian had gone to, and even scarier, she could tell those weren't Krai's.

She was terrified to go there, but even more terrified that something would have happened to the Baby Dragon. Running to the other side of Glahad, she went to face the open space, but almost immediately she stepped back, terrorized by what she had seen behind it. Red scales.

The thought had crossed her mind while seeing where they were headed. She had heard the horn and seen Glahad's misery. She could only think of one scenario to explain all that, but she had been pushing those dark thoughts to the back of her mind, until now. She just didn't want to think about such a horrible outcome.

The growls of both dragons became louder and louder, and more terrifying. The more Glahad was pushing the door, struggling to open it, the more Vrehan's dragon was trying to prevent the Golden Dragon from getting out. Despite the difference in strength between the two, Glahad was somehow weaker than usual. Cassandra bit her lower lip. The Emperor's state had definitely had an effect on his dragon.

She couldn't stay here though, not when she had lost sight of Kian. The gap was now wide enough for her to slip through. Actually, two men could have fit through, but it was still not large enough for a full-grown dragon. Cassandra tried to position herself

around the Golden Dragon, watching both creatures' actions. This was extremely risky. Kian had quickly flown out, but she would have to make a run and pray. It would take only a second for the Red Dragon to notice her and kill her. Hopefully, she could escape it, and even perhaps distract it enough that Glahad could finish opening the door and be free.

Cassandra was starting to become concerned about all the ruckus she could hear on the other side. Cassandra wasn't familiar with the battlefield, but the horrible sounds and screams she could hear coming from behind the wall of red scales looked very much like a war was going on out there. What was happening in the Throne's room? Who was fighting whom? Her heartbeat was accelerating fast. If Kian had flown so confidently, it ought to know who was behind that door. And there weren't many people the Baby Dragon would fly to.

Raising her green eyes on the Red Dragon, Cassandra took a deep breath and prepared herself to make a run for it. Glahad was still struggling and growling furiously, and hopefully, the ruckus would hide her escape even more. The Red Dragon probably hadn't even noticed her. She remembered she and Kian had worked together to make the beast blind, permanently perhaps. She took a deep breath, and started running.

This short distance felt like miles away. Cassandra had no idea what she would find behind the door, but she couldn't stay back and wait to be caught in a fight between two adult dragons. She just ran in a straight line, her eyes riveted on the little space where she could see an actual wall behind Vrehan's dragon. Her heartbeat went even crazier when she ran past the door. Just a bit more! She kept running, even stumbled on something, a rock or a claw, and got back up to keep running again.

Finally, Cassandra jumped over a red paw, and fell on all fours, next to the Emperor's throne. Her eyes tried to grasp a hold of the situation as quickly as possible. Dozens of men were fighting in the Hall, but many of them were down on the ground already. The whole room had its floor covered in blood. It truly was a battlefield, all contained in one room. She looked up, trying to find who the assailants were when she finally saw him. Kairen.

She lost her breath for a second. He was standing there, a few meters away from her. As if he had felt her stare on him, his black eyes rose up to look for her, too. For a couple of precious seconds, they found each other. She was shocked, her heart couldn't even contain this much emotion at once. Tears appeared in her eyes. He really was there. Her War God, her Prince. Kairen was there, standing proudly, his body covered in scales and blood, but alive. She smiled, almost nervously, in such relief her mind couldn't formulate a thought strong enough. Kairen, Kairen, Kairen. She could barely believe it, but it was his obsidian eyes riveted on her.

“Kai-...”

She tried to call him when a wave of pain tore her scalp. Cassandra felt herself being pulled back, as a large hand was holding on by her hair. She suddenly felt the cold metal of a blade held on her throat, and she gasped in horror. She had almost forgotten every dragon ought to have its Master close by. She tried to fight herself, but a sharp pain on her neck prevented her from trying any further.

“Look, look, Kairen. Your precious little witch came right into my arms.”

Cassandra’s heart went from relief to horror in a split second. After she had tried so hard to fight him, she had ended up in Vrehan’s hands! She wanted to scream in despair. She couldn’t believe it, all of this for nothing! She could hear the two dragons still struggling behind her. Glahad was still fighting to get out, but this seemed like a minor detail compared to the fight between the brothers.

Kairen’s face had gone white as soon as Vrehan touched Cassandra. She heard the Second Prince laugh horribly, catching the attention of not only Kairen but his sister, too. Shareen let go of the dead body she was holding and glared at Vrehan.

“You rat face.”

“Oh-oh, be careful, Shareen. I already killed one of them, I’ll happily make it last longer for the other one.”

Cassandra’s blood went cold. Killed who? Who had he killed? She felt like she was missing an important piece of information, and her eyes searched around the room.

Then she saw it. She hadn’t even seen it when she was so close. Missandra, laying in a pool of blood right at their feet. Cassandra immediately screamed in horror. No, no, not her younger sister, not Missandra. Not Mie. She couldn’t even stand that horrible vision. Her sister was lying, not moving, her body circled and covered in red. She couldn’t even see her face, as she was lying on her stomach, her face in the blood and covered by her hair. Cassandra couldn’t stop crying. She couldn’t even check if Missandra was really dead! She couldn’t stand it, she kept shaking her head and struggling against Vrehan.

“Enough!”

On her right, another figure appeared. Cassandra glared as she had never glared at anyone before. Lephys, with his neck perfectly fine. The Fifth Brother chuckled,

amused by her glare, and walked over. He pushed Missandra with his feet, looking bored.

In horror, Cassandra saw her younger sister's body roll down the stairs. She gasped and cried, fighting Vrehan to try and go see her. Across the room, Shareen was just as horrified.

"Lephys, you son of a..."

"Shut the fuck up, Shareen," protested the Fifth Brother. "You are not in charge anymore, and if you don't want that bitch of a witch dead yet, shut the fuck up, for once."

The Princess glared at him, but for once, she truly had no choice. Vrehan was holding Cassandra, a blade clearly held against her throat, and they knew he wouldn't have the slightest remorse over killing her.

Kairen was facing his worst nightmare. He was too far to do anything without risking Cassandra being killed. From far away, they heard the furious growls of Krai adding to those of the two dragons already present. Kian, who had flown to Kairen earlier, looked worried too. The Baby Dragon began retreating behind Kairen's legs, but still growling a bit.

This situation was a nightmare. Cassandra knew Kairen would kill his brother if she wasn't there. It may even explain why her sister had been... like this already. She gasped, and struggled again, furious.

"You won't be Emperor," she hissed, her eyes full of tears and her voice hoarse.

"Oh, I already am, little bitch. The council agreed to make me the Emperor just an hour ago."

"You are no Emperor," she protested. "And you won't become one. You'll be dead. This Empire doesn't need an Emperor like you, no one would allow that. Not the Council, not the former Emperor, not your siblings, no one. The Gods themselves will punish you. You have no rights but those of a cheater, a coward!"

"Shut up, damn witch!" yelled Vrehan.

Out of anger, he raised his blade, and cut a long line down Cassandra's back, making the young woman scream in pain. She had tears in her eyes, but compared to everything she had experienced before, this was nothing. She couldn't allow this.

She had come here to make sure Vrehan wouldn't be the Emperor. She knew this would mean her son's death, Kairen's death, and if she was the obstacle to ensure their safety, Cassandra didn't care.

"I am the strongest Emperor! Kairen is nothing but an idiot!"

"You're about to die, you asshole," hissed Shareen.

"You can't be Emperor when your dragon is weak," added Cassandra. "Everyone will know the Emperor had the weakest dragon out of his brothers. You can't fight Krai, and you can't fight Kairen! You even locked up the Emperor's Dragon because you couldn't see that!"

Behind them, a horrible ruckus suddenly rose as Glahad broke free from the Vault. The door exploded behind them, and everyone near the throne lost their ground. Cassandra pushed Vrehan, and instead of trying a run she could never make, she jumped to get down the stairs. Her body violently hit the stairs, one after another, but finally, she found herself above Missandra's body, just in time to protect her.

The exploded door sent rocks raining down on them, and she tried to protect her head. She felt vivid pains assaulting her body, but she tried to withstand it.

It only lasted a few seconds, after which she found herself covered in dust, and more importantly, caught between the fight of two dragons. Glahad, finally free, attacked the Red Dragon furiously, despite the little space. She turned her head around, trying to spot Kairen in this mess. The first one she saw was Lephys, screaming something she couldn't understand. His eyes were riveted on the two dragons fighting.

Cassandra knew she had to make use of every second she had. She touched Missandra, and much to her relief, her sister seemed alive. Barely. The younger sister was still breathing weakly. Cassandra tried to stand up next, but a sharp pain kept her still. She turned her eyes and realized her left leg was stuck under a large piece of rock. She couldn't even move it! How come she hadn't felt the pain earlier? She tried to stop her tears and looked around for help through the cloud of dust.

"Kairen!" she yelled. "Shareen!"

She called, again and again, even coughing when she breathed in too much dust. Cassandra was absolutely desperate. With the stones of the door exploding in all directions, and the dragons fighting, this room had gone from a war zone to complete chaos. She saw Imperial Guards running in all directions, and she couldn't spot

Shareen or Kairen. She couldn't move Missandra, but she searched her sister, checking all of her injuries and pockets.

"You damn witch!"

Cassandra reacted as soon as she heard the voice coming from behind her. Had he not yelled, he may have avoided this, but the young woman lifted her sister's dagger at the last second, to protect herself.

Vrehan screamed, covering his face and the blood that was flowing. Cassandra was satisfied she had injured him, but she was still stuck there, in front of the murderer.

Cassandra couldn't see the extent of the injury she had just caused. All she could see was Vrehan, staggering back while holding his face and screaming. His hands were literally covered in blood. Sharpened by Kairen, Phetra's dagger had become a murderous weapon used against her own brother.

Cassandra didn't have much time to contemplate what she had done, though. She kept trying to push the rock from her leg, desperate to move and get out of there. Her throat was painful, she kept coughing and crying, as the dust was making the scene an absolute nightmare. She could hear the furious growls of dragons battling somewhere above her. With Glahad free, the two dragons had just taken the fight into the Throne Room, causing more damage every time they threw each other against the walls. Even the roof was starting to creak dangerously above their heads. Cassandra had briefly seen it had been sealed when she had walked in, but how much longer would that hold? Was that Vrehan's precaution against another dragon's attack?

"Cassandra!"

She heard Shareen scream her name, but she felt horribly far away in this cloud of dust. Cassandra tried to answer back, coughing horribly. She glanced back, and Vrehan was wiping the blood off his face. He was going to get back to her any moment now, and Cassandra was still trapped. With Missandra lying half-dead underneath her, she was desperate to free herself. That rock on her leg was massive, and nowhere near anything she could lift with her current strength. Cassandra coughed, trying to clear her throat again.

"Kairen!" she called.

"He won't save you! I'm going to kill you, and watch him weep in front of your dead body!" yelled Vrehan, from somewhere behind her.

Cassandra glared at him, holding the dagger as her last line of defense. Weak or not, she was not going to let that monster approach her without defending herself. She was ready to fight him off using everything she could and all she had. Vrehan staggered, and as he lowered his hand from his face, she could see the horrible line running across his face. One of his eyes was blocked by the blood. Just like his dragon, Cassandra had also blinded one of his eyes with that same dagger.

Vrehan still had one thought, and was coming right at her. She shivered. She couldn't die here, not when Kairen was this close! She kept calling his name and screaming, but all she could hear as an answer were the clamors of men all around fighting, and even louder was the dragons wrestling. Another ruckus imploded from another side of the room, and a wall exploded, throwing more dust and rocks into the mix. This was a complete war scene.

“Cassandra!”

Finally! Cassandra turned her head, and in the middle of the fog, Kairen's familiar silhouette appeared. She could have cried in relief from this sight, if she wasn't already too teary from all the dust. He ran to her, and as soon as he spotted his brother standing behind Cassandra, he threw out his fist. She heard the violent crack of a jaw break above her head, and Vrehan's guttural sound. The Second Brother screamed in pain, and turned around, running away and disappearing into the cloud of dust. If Cassandra hadn't been at his feet, Kairen would have gone to finish him off.

However, the War God didn't hesitate a second and crouched down, grabbing the humongous rock that was sitting on her leg. Frowning, he took a couple of seconds to focus and gather his strength before finally lifting it. Cassandra moved quickly to retrieve her leg, despite the pain. Her ankle was twisted or broken, horribly painful. Right after that, she meant to say something, but Kairen's lips found hers.

This was the oddest time and place for a kiss, but they couldn't stop. In those few long seconds, they just needed it. A wild, passionate, intense kiss to sum up how much they had been dying to see each other again. Cassandra felt her whole body warm up again as if it had been in slumber since they parted, and her heart had stopped. She put a hand on his cheek. She would have hugged his whole body, kissed all of his skin, and caressed his hair for hours if she could. Finally, finally. Her War God was here, her one and only man. Kairen's large hand on her neck was all she needed. This warm, intense touch that told her she was finally safe, even in this wretched place.

However, those seconds were short-lived. As another part of the wall exploded somewhere behind them, they had to part their lips as Kairen moved to shield the two

sisters. Cassandra was deafened by a dragon's screech for a few seconds. She couldn't see anything beyond a few steps.

"Glahad," she said, her eyes meeting Kairen.

"He's losing. Vrehan's firstborn's dragon arrived."

Cassandra's face lost its blood. Glahad couldn't fight two dragons by himself! She struggled to get back on her feet, Kairen helping her, but her mind was still preoccupied.

"Krai?"

"Still outside. Fighting Lephys' dragon."

The situation was horrible. With dragons fighting all over the Palace, it was a complete mess all around. Cassandra crouched down to grab her younger sister, but Kairen was faster. Grabbing Missandra, he put her on his shoulder under Cassandra's panicked eyes. Was her younger sister going to survive this? She was barely alive.

"Kairen!"

They both turned around to follow Shareen's voice. Just like them, Shareen was fighting her way more into the dusty mist than battling any soldier now. She had made a few more victims on her way in, but it took them a few more seconds to reunite, as they needed to stop and crouch down regularly to avoid the debris falling and dragon claws.

"Mie! Is she alive?" asked the Princess.

"Barely. We have to get out of here."

Shareen nodded, but her eyes were above, on the two dragons fighting. Her eyes suddenly opened wide in horror, and something red and dark suddenly splattered all around them. It smelled horrible, and was warm, giving Cassandra no doubt about what this thing was. Fresh dragon blood. She panicked and turned around, trying to catch a glimpse of the fight, but all she could spot were shadows of two dragons fighting furiously.

"Glahad..."

"Yeah, the old one is not going to last much longer," sighed Shareen, shaking her head. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Without saying a word, the siblings exchanged Missandra's body, Shareen carrying the young girl effortlessly while Kairen grabbed Cassandra to carry her. She didn't oppose him. With her injured ankle, she would have been the one to slow him down, and the Imperial Prince and Princess could get out much faster than her.

As they struggled to get out of the room, Cassandra tried to look around for Vrehan or Lephys. She was scared one of them was going to come out at any moment and attack them from behind. Moreover, she was worried about Glahad. The Imperial dragon wouldn't have gotten into this fight if it wasn't for her, and it was dying. It was its blood she had on her dress right now, on top of hers.

"Here!"

Shareen had found some opening in the wall, more like a breach where more rocks had fallen from. They climbed a couple of rocks to finally get themselves into the open air and breathe better. Kairen let Cassandra down, though he wasn't letting go, his arm around her waist, ready to shield her at any given moment. In Shareen's arms, Missandra was still inanimate and looked like death. All of this was too much.

"Kairen!"

Cassandra heard Shareen's scream, but was thrown onto the ground before she understood what had happened. Blood splattered her face, and when she raised her eyes, Kairen was on top of her, making the grimace of someone who's suffering horribly. She heard a dragon's growl, and the Prince suddenly pushed her further away from him.

"Kairen!" she screamed.

The Prince was suddenly pulled back inside, under the two women's horrified eyes. Shareen hesitated a second before putting Missandra down. Kairen had no weapon left, and the gigantic Red Dragon had just dragged him back inside the hellish room like a mere puppet. Her brother was going to die.

Before they even exchanged a word, Cassandra handed Shareen her dagger, and she ran back inside. Cassandra had another objective, and no time to complete it. Getting back on her feet, silently praying for Kairen to be alright, she started dragging Missandra further away. They had to get far enough for her younger sister to be safe.

They had somehow gotten back into the Lake's garden. That part of the Throne room's wall had gotten them right there, which was an unexpected chance for them.

“Cassandra! Missandra!”

Cassandra turned her head and saw Anour running towards them. His eyes were wide open in horror upon the sight of Missandra, and he fell on his knees before them.

“What... what happened?” he muttered.

Cassandra had no time for his questions.

“Get her out of here!” she yelled while trying to run away on her limping leg.

She didn’t have time to verify if Anour was going to follow her instructions. Kairen was back inside, his sister too, and both of them were almost unarmed, if not for the small dagger that was no match to face a furious dragon! Plus, she had no idea how bad that injury he had suffered before being dragged back inside was. Cassandra had seen too much blood today, she couldn’t allow any more.

She wasn’t a fighter, but she could find a way to get them some support. She glanced up, at the chains still blocking the way into this garden for dragons from the outside. She could hear Krai’s furious growls from the outside, but the Black Dragon had no way in. Cassandra had to get rid of those damn chains.

“Krai! Krai!” she called, yelling all of her lungs out.

She didn’t know how the Black Dragon could always find her, but she just knew it would. She heard the growls and kept running. What was happening on the other side? She was unable to run fast enough with her injured leg, but her steps were getting her to the Lake, as fast as she could endure. More growling came from inside the Throne Room’s opening, but she couldn’t look back. Cassandra was silently crying, unable to hold it, and breathing erratically. She was tired, in horrible pain, and terrified, but she had to keep going. She needed to do anything she could to help them.

Suddenly, a silver creature flashed in front of her, agitating its little wings.

“Kian!”

The Baby Dragon had somehow managed to escape the mess of the Throne Room to fly to her, though its silver scales had much dust on them. Kian flipped his wings and landed next to Cassandra, emitting some little, worried, high-pitched sounds, while looking at her and the throne room. She nodded.

“I know. I know.”

She didn't have the strength to say more. The young woman slowly made her way to the lake, fighting the tiredness of her own body. She felt as though she was about to collapse. Finally, she made it to the Lake and fell forward. Down on her knees, she fought against the dizziness and took a deep breath. Kian walked up to her side, tilting its head. Cassandra nodded.

"How about you...help me call your Dad?"

She had no idea if the Baby Dragon had understood her, but it suddenly flipped its wings and took off. Kian was very small compared to any adult dragon, and tiny enough to squeeze through the metallic net above them. Cassandra heard the familiar growling and chirping, probably trying to grab Krai's attention. She had no idea what was going on for the Black Dragon, but she really needed it to come down and help its Master, now. However, the dragon couldn't do that unless it could get past Vrehan's traps first. Cassandra laid down next to the lake, extending her arm into the water. It felt strangely good, the freshwater running on her arm, washing the dirt and the blood away. She closed her eyes for a second, yet still fighting not to give in to the darkness. She had to hold on, a bit longer. The fight was not over.

Above her, she suddenly heard the furious but familiar growl of the Black Dragon. Cassandra opened her eyes back up just as the large shadow flew over her. Krai furiously attacked the fence, but just then, she saw some gigantic metallic arrows flying that way. Probably Vrehan's traps. Krai had to fly away again, dodging them as they kept firing. The Black Dragon growled furiously and started spitting fire too. Cassandra frowned and shielded herself. Though Krai was meters and meters above her, she could feel the scorching heat of the fire where she was. This was terrifying. No wonder no dragon ever did that within the Imperial Palace. They would have decimated the whole building and everyone around in seconds.

However, right after that, Cassandra froze, her eyes stuck looking to the other end of the Lake. Another dragon had just appeared, growling at her and coming towards her, slowly. It was smaller than Krai, but this one was under the net, unrestrained, and menacing. Just from the size and purple color, she knew which one it was.

"You damn bitch," hissed Lephys' voice from behind her. "This time, I'm going to finish you off!"

Cassandra had seen enough horrors for one day, and yet it seemed like this whole nightmare was far from over. Just when an adult, Purple Dragon was slowly walking her way, she heard its Master's voice coming from right behind her. Cassandra rolled in the grass, just in time to avoid the sword that stabbed the soil next to her cheek. She glared at Lephys. She hated that man perhaps even more than Vrehan, if that was

possible. His face was deformed by anger, and he had blood running from his temple to his chin. Cassandra had no idea if he had been injured in the explosion of the wall by one of the dragons, or because of the siblings, but she thought he deserved more suffering than that. The sight of that monster pushing her sister's defenseless body down the stairs was something she wasn't going to forget.

"You damn bitch. No more Kairen or dragons to protect you," he hissed. "I'm going to get rid of you once and for all."

Strangely, Cassandra answered his words with a chuckle.

Maybe she was too tired of all of this, but she laughed nervously at his words. Cassandra knew she might be about to die, but after everything she had already gone through in the last few hours, it was at the very back of her mind. She had just seen her lover being dragged back inside the Throne Room by a furious dragon, she had no idea if her baby was safe, and this Empire was about to be overthrown by a mad man. She had just witnessed too much for one day. Having Lephys appear now was like a nightmare's new twist.

"Stop laughing, you crazy woman!"

Cassandra's nervous laugh wasn't that long, but she had no strength to get back up. She was beyond exhausted. Lephys' furious expression was what kept her upright, though. He was another monster that needed to disappear. When he lifted his sword again, she got ready, and using all of her strength, she raised her arm to splatter him with water, and some mud and small rocks she had grabbed. That attack took him by surprise, and he groaned, having gotten some in his eyes. Cassandra's reflexes came back the second she realized she had a chance. Ignoring the pain, she actually grabbed his sword by its blade and kicked him in the flank.

The Fifth Prince wasn't a fighter. That kind of move wouldn't have worked with Kairen or Vrehan, but Lephys was surprised by her sudden kick and made the mistake of lessening his grip on his weapon for a second. Cassandra took that opportunity, and sent the weapon flying, having it fall into the Lake. She knew she hadn't time to turn it around and use it herself, but at least she could get rid of it.

His eyes were red with all the dirt he had gotten in them, and as Lephys fell on his flank, he quickly got on all fours to wrestle Cassandra. He was even more furious that she had even managed to pull this kind of trick on him, and made him lose his sword so easily. He raised his hand and slapped her furiously. Cassandra felt the pain resonate through her whole body, and her cheek burned. Lephys chuckled from hearing her in pain, and quickly got back on his knees to pin her down, and slap her

some more. It wasn't just about killing her now. He wanted this woman to suffer, for the humiliation she had just caused him. His eyes hurt, she had just made a fool of him, and he hadn't forgotten she had stabbed him either. He kept slapping her furiously, yet ensuring not to put as much strength behind them so that it would have her pass out. He wanted her to suffer some more before he killed her.

"You damn bitch. You're nothing but a useless woman! You think you can hurt me! You think you can touch me! You slut! You're just a damn, wicked bitch! A witch! A rotten slave!"

With each sentence came a new slap, and Cassandra couldn't even pass out to escape. Her whole face was burning, and she could feel the taste of her own blood in her mouth. She tried to struggle, push him away, but no matter what, Lephys was a healthy, young man who was a lot stronger than her. She could only raise her arms to try and protect herself, but even so, he was having fun hitting her wherever he could. She felt his slaps turn into fists when he started hitting her arms, yet she endured it. She held onto the thought that she had gone through worse, that she had to make it through for her baby. For Kassian.

"You're so weak! You think you can play strong? Do you think you can survive this? You're just weak, useless!"

Cassandra's eyes turned towards the Lake, and the Purple Dragon that was coming their way. She could hear Krai's furious growls above, still wrestling with the chains on the roof, and the soldiers trying to injure the black dragon with whatever weapons Vrehan had gotten ready. Cassandra had to do something. No one was coming to save her, she had to move and help Krai herself. If the dragon could access the Palace, Kairen would have a better chance. That's all she needed to focus on right now.

She purposely let Lephys have his fun beating her some more, but she was thinking. She knew what to do, she hadn't gotten closer to the Lake by mistake. Protecting her face as much as she could, she took a deep breath.

"Sometimes it's not about strength," she whispered in her native tongue. "It's about courage."

"What are you saying, woman?!"

Just when he had stopped to try and understand her words, Cassandra used both of her hands, with her joined fingers, to punch him in his jaw. It wasn't that strong, but it was surprising. Lephys let out another painful groan, holding his jaw with a shocked expression.

Cassandra then quickly turned towards the Lake, and started chanting, as loud as she could, in her native tongue.

“What are you...”

He had expected her to try and run away, to crawl maybe, but this woman was singing loudly. Singing something he couldn't understand, in a different language. For a few seconds, the Fifth Prince got worried, but then, he understood. She was just crazy. He laughed, finding this way too pathetic.

“What are you trying to do, witch? Ask the fish for help? Is that all you can do?”

Yet, Cassandra ignored him, and kept chanting, loudly, as her eyes remained closed. Lephys stopped laughing and frowned. What was this, anyway? It looked like her song from the Celebrations, with that same strange language, but this one had... something scary about it. It didn't sound like a prayer, more like a... battle cry. A chill went down his spine, and for a full minute, he wasn't so sure. Her singing had him worried, yet he couldn't understand why. He couldn't possibly be afraid of a weak woman's singing!

Cassandra stubbornly kept going, her arms still protecting her face, her voice getting deeper and louder. The Fifth Prince was torn. While he didn't want to be afraid of that woman, he still couldn't ignore this very uneasy feeling that was growing, as if something dangerous was about to happen.

“Stop,” he muttered. “Stop that!”

“Hisiren da altere, bato. Ya men guerra, ten guerra. Alra mien shin da, almere, li shin, li shin. Oh, God of Water, rise for your daughters, rise for those they murdered, rise for your daughters' blood.”

Cassandra kept going, uttering her words loudly and fast, her song echoing all around them. Lephys found himself staring at the surface of the lake with that worried feeling that was nagging and wouldn't go away. There was something wrong, something was about to happen. However, the surface of the Lake was very quiet and calm, and he couldn't understand why he was finding himself so worried about some stupid woman's singing.

“You foolish woman. You're going to die, this time! I'll...”

Lephys raised his hand, but just as he did, something suddenly flew out of the water. A large shadow covered them, and for a second, the Prince thought a bridge had

appeared above. However, it wasn't a bridge. It was a humongous, reptilian body. It was just so big that it easily overshadowed them before touching the ground on the other side. Like a gigantic snake, it came out of the water, very slowly. More and more of the reptilian body came out, seeming endless. Lephys was completely frozen, thinking he might be hallucinating. Yet, what he first took for a giant snake, kept coming out of the water, and its long body crawled on the grass, circling them in its rings. Its small but palmed front paws landed in the grass very close, making him realize this wasn't a giant snake.

Suddenly, a head bigger than any dragon's head he had seen turned to him. The young man didn't even dare to lower his arm, completely frozen. He was just shaking, horrified. Not even Glahad was this big, and this Creature's head was awfully close. It seemed trapped with them under the grid on the roof, with just enough space. The Creature looked very calm, but even the Purple Dragon looked worried and retreated slowly. Everything except for what was going on in the Throne Room seemed to get horribly silent around them. Lephys was still holding his arm high up, ready to hit Cassandra, but with that thing watching him, he didn't dare move a finger. He could tell those white eyes were fixated right on him.

Under him, Cassandra had stopped chanting, but unlike the Fifth Prince, she wasn't scared to move. She pushed him away from her, and crawled away, laying her body down into the water. It had a terribly good cooling effect on her painful cheeks, and she let the water wash away all the dirt and blood on her arms for a few seconds. Above her, she heard Krai growl again, and it made her re-open her eyes. Cassandra knew she still had to move. She turned around, got back on all fours, and slowly stood up.

Just when she staggered and thought she was about to fall, a sturdy, scaled body appeared in front of her. She chuckled and leaned against the Water God's body to stand up properly. She turned towards the Creature's head and smiled. It was strange how calm the Creature was, and how it made Cassandra feel so much calmer, too. Yet, this fight wasn't over. Next to her, Lephys still had his arm held up, he hadn't dared to move. He looked funny like this, but he was glaring at her.

"You damn witch," he hissed.

Cassandra ignored him, turning her head up. Krai was still blocked up there. She took a deep breath, and turned towards the Water God, addressing the creature in her native tongue.

Lephys couldn't understand any of the words she uttered, but he was speechless when it actually made the gigantic Creature move. Under his eyes, the water dragon slowly

extended its body up, until it reached the chains. With its little claws and fangs, the creature started pulling on the grid. While they had barely moved under Krai's attacks, the long metallic chains couldn't resist the Water God's strength for long. They heard the stones they had been fixated on creaking horribly, and a portion of the roof crumbled, leaving one side of the roof open.

Krai flew in immediately, with a furious growl. The Black Dragon was injured, two arrows having pierced under its left-wing, but that didn't even seem to slow Krai one bit. Compared to the calm Water dragon, the black one came in like a big raging hurricane. Krai jumped on Lephys' dragon, all fangs out, and the two of them started fighting furiously. While the Purple Dragon had stood still in front of the Water God, it couldn't lay down while being attacked, and the two dragons started fighting furiously.

That battle scene seemed to wake Lephys up.

"No!" he screamed.

The difference in strength was obvious between the two. While his dragon had been safe under the chained roof, it was now completely at the mercy of Krai, despite the attempts to fight the Black Dragon off. For a few seconds, it looked like an easy win for the Black Dragon, who was so much bigger than its younger brother.

However, Lephys' furious eyes turned elsewhere.

"Come out, you cowards!" he yelled.

Cassandra turned towards the shadows he was yelling at, from one of the Palace's corridors. What was he planning now? One after another, she saw multiple pairs of little eyes lighting up. She shivered, understanding slowly what was going on. Young dragons lined up in the shadows.

Lephys was calling out for his sons' dragons to help him. Rather than scared, Cassandra immediately found herself furious. That coward was forcing his children's dragons to fight for him! She turned to him, just when the little dragons started appearing in the garden, one after another.

"Stop that," she said.

Lephys laughed, but it was a crazy laugh.

"Oh no, you damn witch. Just you wait until they rip you apart!"

“They are all going to die,” Cassandra retorted. “They are too young! They can’t win and you already know that. You’re sending those dragons to their deaths!”

“I don’t care, as long as I make it!” he yelled.

Lephys suddenly got back on his feet and started running in another direction, away from the fight. Cassandra’s anger rose again. That man was the vilest creature, and a coward at that. Not only was he running from this battle to save himself, but he was also basically sacrificing his sons’ dragons, allowing them to be killed for him and his fight!

Cassandra exchanged a glance with the Creature, but just like the Rain Tribe’s people, the Water God was not a fighter. It had answered her call as she begged, but what now? She couldn’t ask the creature to kill young dragons either. She hated the idea of having to sacrifice innocent lives. Cassandra may be angry, but she kept a clear mind about the situation. Those poor little ones were following Lephys’ orders, maybe not even of their own will. Some of them were probably barely older than Kian. Half a dozen of the little dragons appeared on the grass, all coming in different sizes and shapes. She could tell how young they ought to be, and it just made it all worse.

Just then, Kian flew back to her too. Landing on the grass in front of Cassandra, the little silver dragon was growling furiously at its peers, warning them to leave her alone. The difference in size didn’t impress the Baby Dragon one bit. The young dragons weren’t afraid of Kian either, but they were hesitating on coming closer, with Cassandra standing against a portion of the Water God’s body. Each of them kept growling and sending glances towards the Water God. They were all taller than Kian, but most were not even half an adult’s size.

“Stay away,” she warned them, using her mother tongue.

Either they had understood or were scared, as the little dragons stopped coming closer or just started growling more furiously. Strangely, the smaller ones seemed to be the most eager to fight. Was it because they were influenced to follow their father’s orders even more than the older ones? Cassandra glanced across the lake, where Krai and the Purple Dragon were still actively fighting and growling at each other.

She turned her eyes towards Lephys. He had barely made it half-way towards the corridors, but he wasn’t too far away yet. Cassandra tried to think quickly, and soon found a solution. She ran towards the net of chains that had fallen from the roof. A large portion of it had been ripped down, from where Krai had gotten it, but one of its ends was still hanging above the walls, stretched above Lephys’ head. Cassandra’s eyes followed his steps.

The Prince was running like crazy in the garden and didn't hear anything of her struggle. Cassandra grabbed some of the heavy chains a few steps away from her and started pulling on it. It was very heavy, they were chains made to keep a dragon away after all, not for a woman alone to pull down. Glancing over his shoulder, Lephys saw her pulling like crazy, and looked up at the chains that weren't even moving. He slowed down to see her struggle, thinking he was far enough away, and started laughing again.

"You crazy woman! Those chains were put up there with the strength of several men! Do you really think you can do anything? You're weak, useless!"

Right at this moment, Cassandra stopped pulling, glaring at the Prince. He realized his mistake a second too late. Had he kept running, he may have made it. Yet, he had stopped while he was still underneath the chains, giving Cassandra time to turn towards the Water God.

"Alteske," she said.

Lephys' eyes opened wide in horror, as the Water God raised its claw and brutally pulled on the chains. This time, the walls above him crumbled right away. With a horrible scream, the chains fell all over the top of the Prince, followed by big chunks of the wall. His scream died under all the rocks that buried him alive. Cassandra heard him scream long after the rocks had stopped falling, telling her he was still alive, but suffering miserably.

On the other side of the Lake, the Purple Dragon felt its Master's demise, as it started screeching horribly. Krai took the chance to jump on the screeching dragon. They had fought fiercely, and despite the difference in size, the Black Dragon had some worrying injuries on it. Cassandra was worried about Krai and even more so about its Master, but it looked like Krai would get rid of its opponent soon.

Her attention was grabbed elsewhere. When she wasn't looking, some of the young dragons had run to the pile of rocks covering Lephys, but two of them were still growling at Kian. The little Silver Dragon was growling just as fiercely as its dad, set on defending Cassandra. Though they were still small and young for dragons, those two could bite off her hand at once, and Cassandra didn't want to risk it.

"Kian!"

The Baby Dragon retreated slowly to her as she called its name, but Cassandra still couldn't leave Kian to be injured. The two younger dragons started running after the baby, and Cassandra was scared something would happen to it.

“Kian, in the water!” she said, while retreating towards the Water God.

The little dragon, running like a silver bolt in the grass, suddenly jumped in the air, using its little wings to go and fly above the Lake. The two bigger dragons followed easily, especially as it was flying away from the Water God they feared. However, they were not done with the little dragon. One of them suddenly threw fire its way, and though Kian dodged it, Cassandra’s heart went cold.

Kian wasn’t injured. The silver dragon glanced back at its peers, and suddenly disappeared in the water. The two young dragons were confused for a minute, flying above the Lake and trying to spot the silver scales in the water. They couldn’t follow Kian inside. They were not made to go underwater, unlike the Water God or Kian. Hence, when the Silver Dragon reappeared, jumping out of the water, it completely took them by surprise, and furiously bit one of their wings before diving back in. Cassandra couldn’t keep herself from smiling proudly. The Baby Dragon was learning fast how to use its unique abilities

On the other side of the Lake, though, Krai wasn’t done with that fight. Maybe its Master’s state had brought despair over the Purple Dragon, but it wasn’t giving up. It didn’t let the Black Dragon win, and instead, the two of them exchanged injury after injury.

It couldn’t last this way. The more Krai was injured, the less the black dragon could help Kairen, and the War God was still trapped inside. The image of Kairen being furiously grabbed and pulled back inside the Throne Room just minutes ago was still printed in Cassandra’s mind. She had to do something. She turned to the Water God, but it was here to help her, not injure the other dragons!

Their eyes met, and for several long seconds, she didn’t dare say anything. It was a horrible feeling. The Water God was not one to fight. The mythic creature from all her tribe’s songs, they had talked about it being a God of love, not war. It was obvious the creature’s whole body wasn’t even made for a fight, and it probably couldn’t even breathe fire. Somehow, they were alike. Not fighters and not ones that would kill either. Her kind wasn’t like that. Once again, Cassandra felt utterly powerless. What could she do? Her eyes went to the opening in which Kairen had disappeared, and she could still hear ruckus inside. There was no proof her lover was even surviving the battle.

“Lys, you bastard of a snake!” suddenly yelled a voice behind her.

Cassandra turned around, and with shock, saw Opheus running across the garden, his weapon in hand. The Fourth Prince! She had almost forgotten about him, with

everything that had happened. Right as he ran towards her, another giant shadow appeared above them. Phe, the White Dragon! Without waiting for a second longer, the Fourth Prince's dragon flew inside through the opening she had created earlier and started attacking the Purple Dragon too, relieving a bit of Krai's burden. The Black Dragon stumbled aside, blood flowing on its flank. Krai was still furious and growling, but obviously in need of that little break too. After a few seconds of rest, the two of them jumped on Lys, the Purple Dragon again, with the clear intent to finish him off. They were both bigger and stronger, and this time, the Purple Dragon was completely defeated. Bitten furiously at the throat by Krai, dragged on his back, the Purple Dragon died in a horrible screech of pain. That sound was unbearable to hear. Cassandra shuddered, unable to look that way.

Meanwhile, Opheus finally reached her, just when Cassandra fell on her knees. Though the Fourth Prince gently held her shoulder as she almost collapsed, Opheus had his eyes riveted on the Water God, in shock. The peaceful Creature was looking down at him, strangely calm compared to everything going on around them.

“What the... What is that... thing?”

“I don't have time to explain!” exclaimed Cassandra, grabbing his clothing, panicked. “Have you seen my sister?”

“Y-Yes. I met Anour on the way, he was carrying her out, he told me what happened. Lady Kareen, she went to hide with your child. But Cassandra, we have a bigger problem.”

“What?”

“Phemera,” he said. “The girl...That woman we took out of the cell, it really is Vrehan's younger sister. Your sister made her talk, she told us everything. That bastard had been impregnating his younger sister like a cow to try and breed more powerful dragons!”

“W...what?”

More dragons? Cassandra went horribly pale. She suddenly remembered Phetra's words. Vrehan's secret, why he couldn't kill Phetra yet.

“Vrehan doesn't only have two sons. He's got more dragons stashed away somewhere!”

Cassandra's heart went cold. More dragons? Her eyes went to Krai, still staggering and trying to lick the injuries. Next to it, Phe wasn't too bad, but the white dragon had gotten an injury on its shoulder too. Meanwhile, Kian just jumped out of the water, running on the grass as the other two young dragons that had targeted the baby dragon were struggling to swim their way out of the water. Their wings had been completely destroyed by the silver dragon's repeated attacks.

Cassandra couldn't rejoice in the slightest. They only had three to help them, including a baby one that had hatched only a week ago. How could they fight more? How could Vrehan have even gathered more dragons without anyone knowing? She turned to Opheus, her energy ignited by panic alone.

"How many? Where?"

"She didn't know where her sons and their dragons had been taken! Vrehan hid the sons and their dragons from her. He killed the girls before they were even born!"

That explained the abortion potion they had caught the young Princess buying at the market. As soon as there was no egg to hatch, they knew it was a girl, and Vrehan ensured they ended the pregnancy. Cassandra felt like throwing up. Vrehan was even more of a monster than she had fathomed, and she was even more hell bent on defeating him. If a man like him got on the throne, it was truly going to be the end of this Empire.

"We need to find him or where he hides his sons and their dragons," she whispered.

"I thought he was fighting Kairen inside!" exclaimed Opheus, pointing at the opening.

Cassandra shook her head, getting back on her feet.

"No... No, Vrehan fled in the confusion. Only his men and his dragon are still there. He probably went to get his sons' dragons, then... Who knows how big they are."

"We have to find them then!"

Cassandra nodded, but how? She saw Krai and Phe running towards them from the other side of the Lake, joined by Kian. She had to think quickly. How could she find the young dragons inside this wretched Palace? It was so big! She looked around, and her eyes fell on the Lake. She turned towards the Water God, who seemed to be patiently waiting for her to ask. She let out a long sigh.

"Cassandra?" called Opheus, confusion lacing his words..

“I know what to do, but... You may want to take cover,” she whispered.

The Fourth Prince was utterly confused. He had only truly known Cassandra for a few hours, it seemed, yet that frail-looking woman was shattering all of his expectations, one by one. He couldn't understand. There was a giant half-snake, half-dragon looking creature basically wrapped around her, and he had no idea what that creature was. Or more importantly, why it seemed to obey the young concubine. He glanced towards the side, as Krai and Phe were walking around the lake to come to them. He was also in awe of the fact Cassandra had basically almost managed to kill Lephys by herself!

Cassandra turned to the Water God and spoke to it in that strange foreign tongue of hers. Meanwhile, the screams of pain coming from Lephys could still be heard, and Opheus kept his hand on his sword. If he was still alive, he could still heal. He was ready for his Fifth Brother to come back at any moment.

Strangely, he was actually a bit more concerned about whatever the young concubine was about to do. She looked like she had gone through hell, really. She was covered in so much blood and dirt, not much of her skin was white anymore. Her hair was all over the place, and her dress had even been ripped in several places. Not to mention her ankle, which had turned a horrid dark purple color.

Krai and Phe finally reached them. Both dragons were covered in their siblings' blood. Krai was limping a bit as it came to Cassandra, and lowered its head to sniff the Baby Dragon that had just jumped out of the water. The young concubine didn't have much time for the Black Dragon, as she struggled to get to the Lake. A bit at a loss on what to do, Opheus helped her, though he was frowning.

“What are you going to do?”

“Look for them. The Water God will help me.”

He still had no idea what she was actually about to do, but seeing how sure she was, he didn't dare protest and just nodded. Cassandra slowly got into the water, followed by the Baby Dragon, who looked excited about going back into the Lake. For Opheus, it was also his first time seeing a dragon actually enjoy itself in the water.

Once Cassandra had half of her body immersed in the water, to Opheus' surprise, the gigantic creature decided to follow her back inside the Lake. The Fourth Prince stumbled back, almost falling on his own dragon, as the snake-like creature rolled its long body back inside the water. It was a strangely silent and imposing creature. Only Kian was overexcited, swimming and jumping around in the water like a pond fish.

Even Krai looked confused. The Black Dragon had its front paws in the water, looking at the young concubine and its offspring, yet not following them as they went in deeper.

They got into the water in seconds, but it felt like long minutes to Opheus. He had hidden Phemera with Anour and the younger sister, after Anour had found his way around the Palace to protect them. But Opheus wasn't feeling good about any of this. No one could ignore the horrible sounds of the battle still raging inside the Hall. It wasn't a good sign at all.

His attention was caught closer to them, as Lephys kept blaring under all of his rocks. His sons' dragons were struggling to get him out of there, but it was only a matter of minutes before they succeeded. The Fourth Prince frowned. Those damn little pests!

"Phe," he called.

The White Dragon immediately turned towards the little ones, growling. It only caught the attention of a few of the young dragons, but Phe started going their way anyway. Opheus was making a dark expression too. Cassandra may be too nice and gentle to kill the young dragons, but he wasn't the same. All the siblings had grown side by side with death. He knew exactly what to do.

Still growling, the White Dragon started climbing on the little mountain of rocks, and suddenly jumped on the first younger dragon, killing it with one bite. Lephys was buried deep underneath, but Opheus had no intention to bother digging his younger brother out to finish him off. The truth was, he'd rather not dirty his own hands. Instead, it was satisfying enough to have the weight of Phe climbing on the rocks add to his suffering. With a bit of luck, that would finally crush him to death.

Meanwhile, Cassandra had finally swum to the middle of the lake. Even if swimming was easier for her, the amount of pain her body had endured already made every muscle ache. Yet, she had to hold on, for Kairen's sake. He was fighting his own fight inside that Hall. She had to fight her own battle.

The young woman took a deep breath and dived. Kian and the Water God followed her under the surface. She actually grabbed one of the Water God's horns as it swam next to her. The Creature didn't seem to mind, and took her deeper under.

Once she felt like she was deep enough, Cassandra closed her eyes, and with her mouth closed, started singing. It was a song she never thought she'd use, one that wasn't made of lyrics. At best, it was only like several long sounds, like a siren of some sort. However, it used the deeper layers of her voice, ones that echoed in the

water. Sure enough, the Water God quickly reacted to it. The Creature started making deep sounds, echoing Cassandra's. There was no comparison. Its voice was much deeper and much, much louder. Soon enough, it started resonating all through the lake, sending gigantic sound waves throughout the lake. Her eyes still closed, Cassandra had to stay focused to listen to the echo. She had never done such a thing before, she had only witnessed it, when she was much, much younger.

Years and years ago, she remembered watching the members of her tribe, diving in the water and all together, using their voices to find where the wood of their shacks was getting weaker, where the fish were, or where to dive to hunt. It was a skill she had never practiced herself, but she remembered it well enough, apparently. She could feel her own heartbeat slowing down, as if to let her listen.

She could feel the water around her shaking. Cassandra had suspected the Water God's voice would be louder, much louder. She would even have trouble staying where she was, if it wasn't for her holding on to one of its horns. Next to her, Kian seemed rather amused by the situation, chasing the large air bubbles that left the Creature, and swimming to follow the echo waves.

On the surface, things weren't as calm. To Opheus' surprise, the surroundings of the Lake had started trembling shortly after the young concubine had disappeared underwater. While he wanted to trust her and that Creature she had summoned, Gods know how. It started to worry him a little as the whole ground under him began shaking. One could tell the epicenter of those strange waves that shook the whole area came from the Lake, and Opheus began to worry.

Before he could call her out though, a huge portion of the roof, a few meters away, crumbled down. It was already fragile from the earlier struggle of the iron net being torn down. But now, all the walls around were trembling. Is that what she meant by taking cover? Taking cover looked rather deadly at the moment!

"Phe!"

The White Dragon was still absorbed by its little hunt in the rocks. The smaller dragons had quickly understood that their survival was linked to whichever hole they could squeeze themselves in. While Phe had caught the biggest and killed them already, the smaller ones had managed to crawl under the rocks and hide themselves, though they could still be heard growling and struggling.

However, there wasn't any time to play, as the whole garden was dangerously shaking. After another heavy shake, the White Dragon finally jumped down from its little playground, and went to its Master. Phe extended one of its wings over Opheus'

head, growling at the shaky walls around them. Krai, too, was growling, but the Black Dragon wouldn't leave the border of the Lake, its ruby eyes fixated on the surface. Opheus frowned, feeling the whole Palace tremble. What was this crazy girl doing now? How long could she hold her breath underwater anyway? After everything that had happened today, he felt like he owed it to her to help keep her alive, but there was truly nothing he could do when she was going on a swim with some oversized snake!

To his surprise, the little dragon suddenly jumped out of the water, and flew with a long chirp to Krai, happily reuniting with its parent. Right after that, Cassandra suddenly emerged from the water, struggling to swim. Opheus ran to help her get out of there. She was drenched, and though it had helped wash most of the blood and dirt away, her dress was weighing heavy.

"Are you alright?" asked the Fourth Prince, glancing at her, completely confused. "What was that?"

"It's the Echo, a technique used by my people to...locate things. Anyway, I know where they are."

"You do?"

"I located several younger dragons, somewhere south-west of here, in a very large building, something like a round one."

Their eyes lit up at the same moment, as they both realized what that building was.

"The Arena," whispered Cassandra, astonished.

"Of course. He needed somewhere big enough to put all the dragons, along with what he needed to trap them. That damn rat Vrehan went to free all his little bastards from the Arena!"

The question was, how many dragons were they talking about? Cassandra felt a shudder going down her spine. She turned towards the Great Hall, where the fight was still raging. The truth was, her heart was begging her to go there and help Kairen fight off the Red Dragon. However, she knew she'd be useless there. Shareen was already inside to help him, and Cassandra would be nothing but a hindrance.

Suddenly, just as she hesitated, a part of the wall she was watching burst out, and something violently flew their way.

For a second, she thought she was going to die like this, killed by the humongous projectiled object. However, Opheus jumped on her, and a shadow immediately covered them. Cassandra closed her eyes by reflex, and a horrible uproar burst around them. It felt like a bomb had just exploded behind them. The two of them were thrown onto the ground, and Cassandra felt some of her injuries get worse.

“Phe! Glahad!”

Nothing could have awoken her up more efficiently. Cassandra opened her eyes, and some blood dripped on her cheek. A dragon’s thick, warm, and dark blood. She struggled to sit up, and realized the large shadow over them was one of Phe’s wings. The White Dragon had jumped in at the last minute to protect them, taking most of the hit. Cassandra crawled to get out of there, and finally see what was going on. Opheus had been quicker to get out of there. The Fourth Prince helped her up, but the two of them had to face the horrible scene.

Glahad had been violently ejected from the Great Hall, and the Golden Dragon was covered in blood. Its battered body landed next to the lake. Cassandra felt her heart go horribly cold. Glahad had really been defeated. Had it gotten weaker because of its Master’s disappearance? The old dragon was breathing with difficulty, and Kian was the first to run over, with worried little squeaks. Meanwhile, Cassandra turned to Phe. The poor White Dragon had protected them, but had collided violently with Glahad and gotten injured. One of its wings was horribly ripped open, bleeding and broken in several parts. Opheus looked devastated, running to his dragon to comfort the poor Creature.

Meanwhile, Krai growled and ran to Cassandra’s side. The Black Dragon’s growls were directed at the ruckus that was still going on inside. Cassandra shivered. Glahad defeated, it meant Kairen and Shareen were alone to fight the Red Dragon. Vrehan was really going to win this if she didn’t act quickly. She turned to Krai, grabbing one of the dragon’s horns.

“Krai, we have to go to the Arena,” she said. “Quick.”

She hoped Kairen could hold on a bit longer with Shareen’s help, but for now, she really needed Krai. Neither Phe nor Glahad were in a state to fly anymore, and she wouldn’t make it to the arena by herself.

The Black Dragon growled furiously, and Cassandra climbed on its back. They took off immediately, headed south-west.

“Cassandra!” yelled Opheus as she was already off the ground.

“Stay with them, I’ll be back!”

The Fourth Prince watched the concubine go, with a heavy heart. She was really going to do this on her own? He grimaced and turned to Phe, who was already getting back on its feet. The white dragon may have been in no condition to fly, but it could still attack. Opheus, too, grabbed his weapon, and headed for the pile of rocks.

“When you fucking have to, you have to.”