

Chapter 26

It felt strange, to fly back to the place where everything had changed for her.

Cassandra could feel her nervousness rise as the Black Dragon flew towards the Imperial Arena. Was she scared to go back? Did she hate this place? Surely it's a bit of both. It didn't bring back good memories, except for the moment she met Kairen. However, before that, there was only death. The many, many people whose deaths she had witnessed. She could still remember it all too well. Dozens of slaves, running in all directions, and being violently killed by the six Imperial dragons.

Six dragons, six Princes. Among them, the only one who had sealed her fate, Kairen. She still couldn't really understand the forces that had saved her life that day. Were his feelings for her really something so strong that Krai had felt it before its Master even had set his eyes on Cassandra? It sounded like something out of an ancient tale, and yet it was her life. For Cassandra, that was all it had taken to end years and years of suffering. She had wanted to die in that arena. Not for those people's pleasure, just because being killed by a legendary beast was one way to end an insignificant existence.

"Come on, Krai," she whispered.

She couldn't ignore all the blood covering the black scales. Though it seemed fine flying, the Black Dragon wasn't as strong or as powerful as usual. Krai was tired from the fight with Lephys' dragon and the soldiers outside. How could those dragons, considered as Gods by her people, simply be seen as weapons by the Empire?

Not only was she dreading going to the Arena, Cassandra had also left a part of her heart back inside the Palace. Kairen was still fighting, by the sounds they heard coming from inside the Hall. At least, she hung onto that hope. That the furious dragon growls were proof that neither was dead yet. She had no idea how long a War God could withstand against a dragon, and she was even scared to think about it. At least Princess Shareen was with him.

Krai finally arrived above the Arena. Strangely, maybe because she was seeing it from above, the Arena felt smaller than when she had come here, over a year ago now. Cassandra's nervousness increased again, as Krai started the descent. She was basically unarmed, except for the adult dragon that accompanied her.

They landed softly in the middle of the arena, and Cassandra had to take a deep breath to chase the memories resurfacing. She kept her hand on Krai's warm scales, bringing her some comfort. She truly hated this place, but she was sure the young dragons were here. Why had Vrehan subjected his own sister to this? What justified such a despicable, immoral act, like the rape of his own blood?

A sudden movement caught her attention on the left, and Krai started growling as well. One of the heavy doors that led to the cells opened, revealing two dragons.

Cassandra gasped. Those didn't look like the usual dragons, though. More like creatures that had come out of a mix between a nightmare and a horrible mistake. The first one had half of its head missing, as if it had melted down, and breathed heavily, its maw open and drooling. It was walking awkwardly, with its front paws having a noticeable difference in size. The neck was a strange shape as well, and it had scales missing in some spots, exposing horrible, brownish flesh. The second one wasn't any better. It was the fattest, yet shortest, dragon Cassandra had ever seen, and its wings were obviously too small to support its weight. It had a strange arched back too, like a hunchback. Both dragons didn't even come close to the beauty of a proper dragon, like Krai or the Water God. Those two looked like they had come out of a children's bad drawing of a dragon.

"What are those?" she whispered.

"Aren't they amazing?" chuckled a voice behind the dragons.

Cassandra stepped back. Vrehan appeared from the shadows, coming out slowly.

His face bore the horrible injury she had inflicted on him earlier, the flesh still ripped open in the middle of his face. It wasn't bleeding anymore, but the reddish scales were obviously struggling to appear on such an irregular surface. The Second Prince looked like a reptile was trying to take over his face, and his left eye was behaving strangely too, as if it couldn't fix itself but was still trying. He was almost as scary and deformed as the monsters he had created.

"You're... crazy," she whispered.

It seemed like he had heard her because he broke into a burst of mad laughter that echoed throughout the Arena. Cassandra frowned, completely lost by his crazy behavior. Next to her, Krai curled up around the young concubine, arching its back and growling in a warning for the two monsters not to approach them. The scary thing was, no matter how horrible they were to look at, those two things were still rather big. The little ones Cassandra had fended off before were nothing compared to these

two. These two dragons were between a third to half of the size of Krai, and unlike the Black Dragon, they looked...up for a fight.

She glared at Vrehan. The Second Prince was slowly walking her way, his mouth distorted with what should have been a smile.

“You... the witch of some lost, meaningless tribe... You really should have died in this Arena. Isn’t this ironic? We are about to set things straight. You’ll finally be dead, as you should have been, and my Brother will go back to being childless.”

Cassandra saw red at those words. The mere thought of that man touching one hair of her baby’s head was enough to turn this gentle woman into the fiercest of warriors. She was never going to step back, as long as she could stand between him and Kassian.

Meanwhile, the dragons kept growling at each other, and Cassandra couldn’t help but glance at them again.

“How could you do such a thing?” she hissed. “To your own sister.”

“My sisters?” he laughed. “Do you know what my sisters are? My sisters are nothing but mistakes. They are useless things, unless they serve me. That’s right, even slaves are more useful than those things you call my sisters.”

“How can you say such things? About your own family.”

“My family? The only woman that ever mattered to me was my mother, and even she was a crazy, crazy bitch. The only thing she did good in her life was keeping me alive. She gave birth to five daughters, and she loathed each. But for me? I was her son. Her only boy, the one she had to protect at all costs to ensure her own survival.”

Cassandra suddenly remembered Shareen’s words. Their mother was a former prostitute. Phetra had gotten furious when Shareen had reminded her of that fact.

The prince kept talking, coming closer and closer to her. He looked like he was strangely calm, or in some sort of trance. He had never been so scary to Cassandra. She wanted to run away, to not be trapped here with him. Yet, she knew she couldn’t. There was no one else left to hold him back from going to the Palace, or to Kassian. Opheus’ dragon was injured, and Cassandra knew he wouldn’t be able to match up to his older brother. He had to take care of Lephys, first. Kairen and Shareen were still stuck with the Red Dragon, and she hoped Anour was protecting Missandra, Lady Kareen, Kassian, and even the poor Phemera. It felt like the end. Finally, this feud was

coming to an end. All the hatred that had stayed concealed was coming out into the open, all the brothers picking sides and fighting each other.

“What was it all worth, all this?” said Cassandra, glancing at the monster dragons. “Your sisters, your children, even your father. You’ve sacrificed everyone, simply to become Emperor?”

The Second Prince laughed.

“To become Emperor? No, I did it to survive! My crazy mother went through hell in order for me to survive! Every single day, I had to see it. She killed servants that tried to harm me. She begged my father for his attention, acting like the whore she was, just in the tiny hope he’d give her another chance to give him a son. My father was the worst of them all. You think I used my sisters? That man used my mother as a pawn, a mere toy between him and his favorite woman.”

Cassandra frowned. She had mentioned it... Lady Kareen had talked about something like this. How the Emperor got closer to other women, even got engaged to them to try and get her attention. Cassandra had never thought twice about that.

“She was nothing but a toy he would toss aside whenever he could. My mother was constantly begging, dying for a second of attention, making herself the most pitiable woman. She cried more than any woman can cry, she screamed, she begged endlessly. She was such an annoying thing to see. She was a crazy, crazy bitch... A useless bitch.”

Cassandra was shocked. She had never thought being a concubine was easy. She knew how hard some of them fought to get the Emperor’s attention. How some killed and got killed. Cassandra was well aware of how lucky she had been, in this nest of snakes, and she had always kept in mind those women were mostly fighting for their survival. She had never thought about how one woman could actually lose her sanity over this... Lose herself.

“Can you believe, she was actually stupid enough to love that man you call my father? She believed his lies, she was ready to do anything for him. She taught me one thing, and one thing only. Survival. I had to survive, I had to become his only son. I had to become the Emperor, and she’d do anything for me. My mother dirtied her hands more than anyone, and she taught me everything I needed to know. It was quite fun, sometimes. When she wasn’t completely crazy, she wasn’t totally dumb!”

Cassandra wanted to vomit at each sentence he said. Deep in her heart, she understood. How a woman could have lost herself in her attempt to get the Emperor

all to herself. How she could have become absolutely insane with jealousy and paranoia... and took her children down with her.

Vrehan wasn't born a monster, he had been purely created by his mother's madness. She could hear it in his voice. He wasn't crazy. He was just a child born out of resentment and hatred.

"It was so easy, once you understand the rules of the Palace, you know. It was a game for me. Kill, but don't get caught. My mother let me kill the servants that displeased me, or she'd do it herself. She hated my sisters so much. She killed two of them, and the others quickly understood if they weren't useful to me, they might as well be dead, too."

Their mother had killed...her own daughters?

"It was such fun. If I ordered it, my sisters killed anyone. I was already the Emperor of my own Palace, and they were my servants. Phetra was the smartest one. She always did whatever I asked, so I kept her around. She even ordered the others, understanding what I wanted before I even knew myself that I wanted it. It was fun, seeing them thrive, just to keep me satisfied."

Vrehan looked at the two horrors next to him, suddenly frowning.

"I thought I'd be father's favorite in no time. Sephir was going to die anyway, and the others were meaningless idiots. I had forgotten about Kairen."

Cassandra suddenly realized. Lady Kareen had kept her children away from the Imperial Palace to keep them safe. After what had happened to her oldest children, and to the young Kairen, it was a wise decision. It meant they had mostly grown away from their siblings... out of Vrehan's sight.

The Second Prince's eyes got darker, reliving some memories he obviously didn't appreciate.

"I knew the one woman my mother hated most was Kareen. The one woman my father truly loved. My mother killed her eldest, but she killed my mother as revenge. I was... at a loss. I couldn't understand why that woman couldn't be killed, like she had done to my mother, killing her so openly. Plus, if that wasn't enough, that bitch still had managed to have more children, and another Son! That was the one woman I couldn't get to kill. If our Father discovered I killed one of Kareen's, I knew I would die. It was the one game I couldn't play without risking my own life."

So the Emperor's love for Kareen had saved them, buying them some time after all. After Vrehan's Mother's death, the young murderer had understood he couldn't kill his siblings and get away with it. Shareen and Kairen were protected, more so than their other siblings. Cassandra couldn't even begin to understand what monstrosities had taken place behind closed doors at that time. The monsters their Mothers had created, all for their survival or greed... for one man.

Suddenly, Vrehan shook his head.

"So, I finally understood. I had to find a way to be better than him. To have the strongest dragon, the most children. I needed to be the best Prince. The one my father would have no choice but to choose!"

Cassandra was torn. Between disgust, horror, and... compassion. A part of her was hearing Vrehan's story and seeing it through her own eyes. Once pulled into the Dragon Empire, she had always thought there was something wrong with it. She had thought even more so when she had met Kairen, his mother, and heard their story. This Imperial Palace was the scariest place in the Empire. Filled with beautiful women, treasures, all the food and gold one could want, and endless rivers of blood. This kind of place wasn't an environment for children to grow up safely. It was a place for them to kill or be killed.

Her people had an expression for that. The river may not taste like the sea, but it doesn't get sweeter. No one could completely be free of its birth condition, and no child born from the Imperial Palace could be born without blood to be shed either. It was an endless circle of vengeance, jealousy and death haunting those golden walls. How could they pave their own way of staying free of all violence in those conditions? Vrehan had been raised under his mother's madness, and therefore became the monster one woman's tortured mind created.

"I have done everything... I became the best in everything!" he yelled. "I was the smartest child, the strongest, even the one with the largest beast, and yet, when that bastard came back, all of it was for nothing. My Father only saw Kairen and his dragon, nothing else. None of us mattered. He gave him the best opportunities, the best chances. Even giving him an army, so he could come back after that victory and be acclaimed by anyone!"

Vrehan's anger shone through in every single word he spat. He had become about as red as his dragon and didn't bother to control himself anymore. Cassandra looked at him, standing a few paces away, but she was also still nervously keeping an eye on the monstrous progeny. Krai was growling in a low tone, but its arched back and visible fangs made it clear the beast was ready to attack as soon as she gave the word.

That jealousy between the siblings was no different from their mothers'. They all longed for their father's attention, and a chance to survive. Yet, Vrehan was the one who had gone too far, who had fallen into this hole without any chance of repair. Cassandra knew this tone of voice, it sounded like despair and madness, molten together.

"It was always about Kairen, the prodigal son, the War God, Kareen's son. Father was blind anytime that woman or her children were in the room. Even his damn sister mattered more than us, his sons!"

Cassandra remembered seeing Shareen stand like an equal amongst her brothers. She was the only princess allowed to do that, but part of it was because she had taken that right for herself. It wasn't Kareen or the Emperor who had given her a chance to talk and dispute her brothers, to stand above her sisters. The princess had chosen to stand her ground and become as strong as she needed to be. She had made her own way in life. Shareen couldn't have gotten that strong, or become able to discuss matters of the Empire on par with her brothers or her father's counsel, simply because she was the favorite daughter. On the contrary, she may have become the favorite daughter because of everything she had worked hard to achieve.

Vrehan was simply blind and deaf to her actions, just like he was to his own sisters. He couldn't see a woman as a whole human being, only as a thing to be subjected to another man. To a father, a brother, or a son. Just like her mother, Shareen had long decided she was more than that. Cassandra didn't think it was simply her education that had molded her, it was her nature.

"He didn't have to do anything, he always came first in every fucking thing! The minute he was born, that damn Kairen became the nemesis of my life!"

"You're wrong."

After all of his screaming and whining, Cassandra's soft voice took him by surprise. The Second Prince looked at her, looking a bit lost for a second. He probably didn't think she'd even dare talk back, but there she was. The young concubine wasn't even afraid. She was standing tall, backed up by the strongest dragon alive, and she was not about to step down. She wasn't impressed or scared by him.

Cassandra had found in herself the very same feelings she had the last time she stood in this arena. She wasn't afraid to die, she wasn't afraid to stand in the face of a man-killing monster. A lot of things had changed, and she was stronger than before. She wanted to survive this time, but she was also ready to give her life to save her loved ones. She wasn't scared in the slightest, a strange halo of quiet was with her.

“You’re wrong,” she repeated. “You saw what you wanted to see. Kairen never had it easy, none of your siblings did. You’re talking as if he had cheated, but you’re the one who took this for a game. You nurtured your own jealousy after what your mother had experienced. You could have ended it years ago. You could even have saved your mother and your sisters, but instead, you played this game of death and you had fun until you didn’t.”

Vrehan’s face was getting more and more distorted with rage as she spoke. Cassandra’s composure was even more of a slap to his face. He couldn’t stand a woman talking back to him, without any fear in her eyes, and he couldn’t stand her being Kairen’s woman. He wanted to gouge her eyes out. Those eyes that looked at him like he was a pitiful thing, or a crazy animal. Those green eyes that judged him.

“You could have led a good life if you had stopped all this,” Cassandra continued. “Your mother was the one who caused the havoc, but you happily followed her into madness, and you even pushed all the blame onto her. You used her. At least she had her love for you and the Emperor as an excuse. But, you? You didn’t have any real reason to inflict all the damage you caused. No one forced you to kill people, abuse your sisters, or even fight your brothers. You could have spared many lives, but you just relished in your power until someone overshadowed it. It didn’t even have to be Kairen or Shareen. You needed a bone to pick and you found one.”

Vrehan clenched his fists and his teeth, so furious he looked like he was about to explode.

“You ignorant witch!” he shouted. “You think you know the ways of the Palace? Do you think you have any idea how cruel that world is? I was merely a child! I only followed the path my mother had...”

“I was a child too when I was captured,” said Cassandra in a very soft and low voice. “I suffered. I saw all the people I loved killed, tortured, raped, and sold by men I didn’t know. I saw dozens of young girls like me, crying and suffering. I cried and I begged, too. I was whipped so many times, I thought I’d die. I was cut so deep I know the color of my own bones. I also experienced despair and anger, and it did not make me into a monster.”

The Second Prince looked at a loss for words for a few seconds. Then, he scoffed.

“You were merely a slave! You were insignificant, you were bound to be killed anyway! You couldn’t rebel! However, if you had the chance, just once, to hold the whip and torture the one who had done this to you, tell me you wouldn’t have done

it?! Tell me you would have remained all pure and innocent! Do you think I am a monster? We are all monsters then!”

“No one held the whip for you,” retorted Cassandra.

He blinked, having lost what she meant. This time, Cassandra simply looked disgusted at him, and resolute. The concubine shook her head and put her hand on Krai’s neck as she stepped forward.

“No one inflicted you such suffering, you’re the one who caused it. You mimicked your mother’s craziness. You don’t deserve to even compare yourself to any victim. You and I, we are not the same. You only inflicted pain on others, but you never suffered enough to know the full extent of the pain you caused. You just used it as an excuse to justify yourself.”

“I am the victim! I wasn’t born to be in someone’s shadow! It is my throne! No one knows what I went through, I did what I had to! Don’t judge me, you damn slave! You know nothing! I am the new Emperor, the only one that matters!”

His madness was beyond saving.

Cassandra realized that as she watched him scream, shout, and empty his lungs dry. This man had already sealed his own fate several times. There was no use in saving a fool running towards his end. Even if it wasn’t for all those reasons, Vrehan was not one that could be saved. Cassandra glanced towards the damaged dragons that were still growling at Krai. It was nothing pretty to see. Those things were never supposed to be created, yet they had been born out of one man’s madness and a woman’s suffering. The vision of Phemera’s terrified eyes came back to her mind, giving Cassandra the conviction she needed.

“Enough,” she said. “It ends now. All of your madness, your schemes, and all the pain you inflicted on others.”

The Prince scoffed.

“Ha! Do you think you can stop me? You, the slave woman? The white witch? I knew you’d be a problem, ever since Kairen saved you from this arena, I should have gotten rid of you faster... It’s high time I get rid of you, you’re an eyesore!”

Just as he yelled those last words, the dragons suddenly got more agitated, growling loudly and running towards Krai. The Black Dragon didn’t move, staying close to Cassandra, but when the young dragons reached them, Krai was ready. The sound of

the first attack resonated throughout the arena. Cassandra dived down to cover her ears, as one of the dragons growled even louder, right above her. A dragon's growl could be as soft as a purr, but it could become a deafening siren when they wanted to be heard. She rolled to the side, blinking through the dust clouds the gigantic bodies had stirred.

So it had begun. She could hear Krai's anger unleashing, but she couldn't stand around. She could be crushed at any moment by their weight, or get scratched by a dragon's claw if she wasn't careful. While Krai had done its best to protect her, the Black Dragon couldn't focus on Cassandra when it had to fight two of those dragons. She had to get out of there, as the fight was bound to get messy. She struggled to escape, as she was keeping an eye on the fight between all three dragons, while not making the mistake of finding herself in Vrehan's reach.

She wasn't losing sight of the main enemy. Cassandra knew she couldn't match up to Vrehan in a fight, but she ought not to lose him for a second time either. She had to find a way to end this.

The Second Prince didn't look willing to fight yet. He didn't have a weapon, and his face still bore the horrible scar of the injury she had inflicted upon him earlier. However, his dark eyes were absolutely burning with rage at her, and the deathly aura around him wasn't good either. Vrehan wasn't even bothering to look at how the dragons' fight was going. The gigantic creatures were making a deafening ruckus, yet he wouldn't even glance their way. He was focused on one thing.

He stepped forward, making Cassandra shiver uncontrollably. She had gone out of the dragons' reach, but she was only a few steps away from the enemy, and perhaps she would have wanted to fight the dragons more.

"You... Everything went off-track because of you," he hissed. "If you hadn't pushed those ideas into him. If you hadn't bore his bastard."

Cassandra glared at him, as she tried to get back on her feet. Her leg was horribly painful, and all of her body was sore, but hearing him insult Kassian gave her a new wave of courage. As he came closer, she grabbed some of the dust around her and threw it at him.

"Ah! You bitch!" he shouted, rubbing his eyes and stumbling back.

Cassandra took those precious seconds she had won to get back on her feet and hurry in a different direction, heading towards the cells of the Arena. She didn't even have

enough strength left to run. There weren't many doors open in the Arena, but she had remembered enough from her short stay in the Arena cells to remember which to take.

She couldn't fight Vrehan on her own, but she could buy some time if she could at least find a decent weapon. She remembered the shows at the Arena, specifically the warrior fights. Though their participation may not have been voluntary, their choice of weapon was - they had to have been able to pick them from somewhere around here. Maybe some could have been left inside the cells.

Trying to forget the impending death chasing after her, Cassandra rushed to the cells. She knew Vrehan would kill her, slowly and painfully too. Kairen wasn't here to stop him, no one was. Her only ally nearby was a dragon that was already fighting two other horrid creatures. Cassandra knew she had to fend for herself, she'd have to save herself.

As soon as she reached a cell, her memories brutally resurfaced, like a nightmare haunting her. She remembered being dragged there like all the other slaves, thrown on the filthy grounds of the cages with no water, and no hope of survival. She could feel the weight of the chains on her limbs and neck, like a phantom... She took a deep breath and pushed the fear aside.

They were just empty cells now. Cassandra had to squint to find her way inside and around. Prisoners destined to die had no use for light, so there was only the bare minimum here. A few rays were barely able to make it through the miniscule openings between the stones that composed the grounds of the Arena. She tried to remember where to go, but every cell in there seemed like it was the same, only the contents changing.

Putrid smells hit her as she hurried between them. It was like something left there was rotten and decaying, adding on to the long forgotten excrement. She felt like throwing up; it was the absolute worst. Everything was filthy, but she had no choice other than to hold on to the bars to keep herself going without falling. Vrehan was still following her, closing the distance between them. She could hear his footsteps, making her heartbeat accelerate. Cassandra couldn't fathom dying in here, it was a horrible place to die.

"I swear, when I get my hands on you, I'll tear you limb from limb, and hang you from the Palace's gates for all to see! The White Witch of the Mountain will be no more!"

The way he spoke her nickname with such hatred left a bitter taste in her mouth. But Cassandra was trying not to listen to him, she was hellbent on finding a way out of

there. Anything to survive this hell. Where were those weapons? She could clearly remember people waiting to fight, receiving their chosen weapons from the jailers. While they were trained fighters and not slaves, they were insistent that they use these sanctioned weapons - something about the Arena and security. But it was all a lie, Cassandra knew. She had overheard the jailers laughing about it. Discussing how the improperly sharpened and dull blades would make the fights last longer and be more bloody. It was horrible that they couldn't even be granted a swift death.

Cassandra didn't necessarily need a properly sharpened weapon though, she didn't have the skills to fight an Imperial Prince. She just needed something that would, at the very least, allow her to defend herself. Anything at all.

"You're so pathetic... You can't even do anything without a man to protect you. You're nothing without him, just a slave. You should have died quietly like the rest of your filthy people!"

Vrehan's words were echoing along the halls, like a shadow threatening to devour her at any moment. His voice was bouncing off every wall, Cassandra couldn't tell where he was or how far behind. She didn't want to even think about it. Fear would only slow her down, but hope made her faster.

Finally, she spotted it - a pile of weapons randomly thrown against a wall. Cassandra ran towards it and started rummaging through. She even cut herself a couple of times in her frantic search, but she needed to find one she could handle. Many of them were too heavy for her to wield, and she really couldn't afford another disadvantage while fighting off the Prince. As she heard his footsteps closing in, she settled on a small sword. It was a different shape than the one a man would normally use, being thinner and lighter than the others, but she had no time to find another weapon.

While Cassandra pretended to look through the pile of weapons, she was really paying close attention to the sound of his steps. He was getting closer, and she was going to be ready for him. Her only chance would be if she could take him by surprise. She tried to calm herself and focus, she couldn't afford to panic now. She couldn't die like this, not here, not now.

"You damn witch, I..."

As he was almost upon her, and she was ready. Cassandra dodged to the side, and in the same movement, swung her weapon towards him. The Prince let out an agonizing scream as she saw something fly away. She had no idea what it was until she noticed Vrehan's hand covered in blood, missing some fingers.

“You... Bitch!” he uttered between his teeth.

She had managed to injure him just enough that he lost focus for a few seconds. Cassandra retreated until her back hit a row of bars. She had hit another cell, and for a second, despite the screaming, she heard something else. She turned her head, and sure enough, there was something there. Something big that was breathing very slowly. What she had taken as some airflow through the long corridors before was actually from something breathing. A dragon’s breathing. She felt a drop of sweat run down her spine. More of Vrehan’s monstrosities? Or...?

“Sire?” she called out.

She could barely recognize the magnificent creature as it moved forward from the shadows. It had lost so much weight! The Blue Dragon opened its eyes to look at her and she could tell there was so much sadness in them. So this was where the dragon had been. How did Vrehan even get the First Prince’s dragon in there? This cell looked so cruelly small for the large beast!

Cassandra extended her arm to try and reach it. Its scales were barely warm under her touch. The dragon looked like it had given up on life, just like Glahad before. They were bound to a life of despair once their Masters were gone.

She had no time to console the blue dragon, though. Vrehan might have lost a few fingers, but the red scales had appeared just as quickly on his skin to seal the injury, and his madness only intensified after that. His face was so deformed by his rage and injuries, he looked more akin to those horrible creations outside, barely human anymore. Seeing him approach, Cassandra tried to move to the other side of the bars, holding on to them to keep herself from falling. She heard Sire growl behind her, as it recognized her assailant too. With its anger rising, the blue dragon had a surge of adrenaline at seeing the Second Prince. Cassandra continued retreating until her shoulder hit a wall, cornered now between it and Sire’s cell. She bit her lip, desperate.

“Finally!” the mad man hissed. “Here we are... A perfect place for you to die. In a filthy cell... It suits you, slave!”

They each raised their swords and Cassandra’s was abruptly knocked from her hands in one swift movement. Just as she heard the metal clink on the stone floor, she crouched down as his blade violently dug into the wall right above her ear. She was completely cornered and weaponless now, holding her arms up to shield herself even though she couldn’t possibly endure another assault. Her resistance was futile.

“You... You’re finally going to die, you b...!”

This time, he didn't have the opportunity to finish insulting her. Cassandra raised her head as she felt something warm drip on her hands. Vrehan was paralyzed, his face frozen from shock, as the dragon's claw retracted from his throat. Cassandra was so stunned by the gruesome sight, it took her a few seconds to realize his shoulder was pierced as well. She slowly glanced to the side.

From the cage, Sire had suddenly lunged forward to extend its claws through the bars. Vrehan had been so focused on Cassandra and insulting her, he likely didn't even notice the dragon's presence lurking in the shadows. His body was now amply perforated by Sire's claws. Gasping for air, he began making some horrible sounds and groaning, as if he were about to start coughing up blood.

Cassandra covered her mouth with her hands. Was he going to die...? However, the dragon started getting agitated in its cell and wriggled itself around violently. Cassandra saw the walls behind suddenly start to shudder under the pressure. Could the blue dragon break out of this cage? If she could manage to get Sire out, it could help Krai!

"Sire, keep pushing, please!" she yelled as she ran for her little sword.

As the dragon retracted its claws, Vrehan was left holding the gaping holes in his throat and shoulder with his own hands. The dragon blood was trying to heal him, but the pain was so bad that he couldn't even stand straight and he stumbled trying to get to Cassandra. He was in a nightmarish condition, and his bloodshot eye was clearly giving away what he was about to do next.

The young concubine didn't even have the time to be scared. She had her sword back, and as he approached, she held it up defiantly to defend herself. While Vrehan had dropped his sword, he was still coming for her, his hands bare but he still had a clearly murderous intent. The situation was unconscionable. With Sire going berserk behind them in its cell, the dragon threw itself against the walls, its cries and screeches were deafening. Cassandra slowly retreated, keeping an eye on them. The gusts of dust coming from between the stones left no room for mistake - that wall could easily burst from the angry dragon's fit. It would just take a bit more.

"Uuuugh... You..."

It was all going to depend on the timing. If she could hold him off for just a little bit longer.

Vrehan approached slowly, no longer looking even remotely human. There was nothing left but a wrathful monster, out for blood and covered in it himself. She tried

to control her sword and swung it in his direction when he came too close. She silently begged Sire to hurry up. She had one last crazy idea, and it might be her only chance to survive this.

“You... Die!!!”

He thrust his hand at her, still missing half of his fingers, but Cassandra managed to raise the blade just in time to protect herself. The Second Prince violently snatched the blade from her, cutting his hand in the process, and letting out another guttural screech. A cold shiver ran down her spine and she felt the control over her weapon leave her. Vrehan had torn it from her hands and thrown it out of reach, across the cell.

Cassandra realized she was about to die. Her eyes went towards the wall a final time as the stones started to give way. About to collapse, even the roof above them was now raining dust and little rocks.

She felt his hands brutally wrap around her throat. She gasped for air, fighting the violent pressure of his grip. He was strong, so strong she was sure her throat was about to collapse. Through the haze, she heard a furious growl from somewhere in the distance.

“Finally...” he gasped through his still-damaged throat.

The evil grin painted on his face, with his bulging eyes and ravaged figure, would be the worst sight to die to. Cassandra brought her hands up to grasp his wrists, desperately struggling to loosen his grip. Her lungs were already painful, but now she couldn’t even manage a puff of air, she couldn’t breathe at all. Her throat was so raw, she felt tears in her eyes.

Suddenly, a horrible ruckus resonated behind them. She saw Vrehan turn his head, panicked, right as the wall behind them started to collapse. Cassandra closed her eyes for a split second that seemed to last forever. As if her life was flashing before her, she saw her son’s adorable face frowning like his dad and staring at his little dragon plushie, she saw Kian jumping around in the water and running towards Krai to play. She saw Shareen and Kareen, sitting together in the garden and laughing, and she saw Kairen lying next to her in bed, whispering words she wanted more than anything to hear again.

Cassandra opened her eyes again, resolute, and in a desperate final attempt, she held onto his wrists as tightly as she could and pulled them both under the crumbling walls..