

Chapter 7

The winter storm lasted two nights and two days. During that time, Cassandra and Kairen spent all their time together in their tent. It was cold, but their bodies were enough to warm each other up. Evin and a couple of other Imperial Servants showed up from time to time to bring in food, and disappeared just as quickly as they appeared.

It was like they were in their own cocoon, far from the troubles their difference in status brought, far from any concerns about the camp or the Capital.

Though as soon as the storm calmed down, they were both ready to resume their duties. After a long kiss goodbye, Kairen and Cassandra parted. The Prince left to see his men, and Cassandra walked back to the hospital. She had some company on the way.

“Good Morning, Madam.”

“Morning, Evin. Are you okay?”

“We are used to storms such as this, Madam.”

As usual, the Imperial Servant was a man of few words. The black dragon following her every step was more noisy though. Maybe because it had been alone outside for a while, Krai was literally beside her every step, and growling a bit whenever Cassandra ignored it for too long. However, she was glad Krai walked next to her, as she had to hold on to the dragon to make her way through the snow. It was soft like powder, but so high sometimes she would stumble or have a hard time stepping into it. Thankfully, Krai’s hot body made most of the snow around them melt under its steps, though it soaked Cassandra’s dress. It took a long time for them to reach the hospital and Cassandra was a bit anxious. Were the men alright? How many of them would have suffered during the storm?

As soon as she stepped in though, it seemed like everything had been fine, despite her absence. The volunteers present were doing great following the instructions she had left on some papers and actually didn’t notice her before she stepped into one of the rooms.

“Lady of the Mountain! Welcome back!”

“Lady Cassandra!”

A few men ran to her, asking many questions at the same time until Evin ordered everyone to calm down. Cassandra was mostly needed to instruct how to treat complex injuries, which disease they were dealing with, and how to make new ointments and serums. It didn't take long though. Sadly, as she had feared, the cold brought by the winter storm had killed the men who were already sick. Some who had been injured by falling trees or other accidents had come in too, but nothing major. Cassandra did her best in a few hours, but she was supposed to depart with the Prince before nighttime.

Hence, she left after giving some more instructions to the volunteers present. She was still hoping to find real apprentices, but for now those men were doing great on their own.

To her surprise, when Cassandra walked out of the hospital the Prince was already there putting some bags on his dragon's back. Krai was calmly resting in his presence, though its eyes followed Cassandra.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes, My Lord. Are we leaving now?”

“Get on,” he said with a nod.

Cassandra could now climb Krai by herself, but Kairen still helped her. Evin watched the two take their places on the dragon's back. The black beast probably already sensed what was happening since it stretched his wings and got up. Kairen held Cassandra, as the dragon moving around caused her to lose her balance.

Then as usual, the dragon took off, shortly flying high in the grey sky. It was colder than the previous time, and Cassandra felt the bitter wind despite her thick cloak and the Prince holding her. Her cheeks were red and she covered her mouth as her throat started to ache a bit from breathing the cold air. Kairen looked fine, as usual, although he did put on a winter cloak as well this time.

The black dragon had to make double the effort to fly due to the strong wind and the snow. It wasn't as bad as during the winter storm, but Cassandra couldn't see any of the landscape below or far away. She even wondered how Krai knew where to go when they couldn't even see the ground. However, the dragon didn't seem to mind. It was flying confidently, not even bothered by the snowfall, or the winds challenging its wings.

Yet, it took a bit longer for them to reach the castle, or so Cassandra thought. Maybe it was because of the cold, but she was glad when Krai finally landed on the white coat in the Onyx Castle grounds. Just like before, Patrina hurried out to welcome them, followed by the other servants. Though they did not dare to say a word in front of the Prince, the young girls' eyes were shining bright in Cassandra's direction. She could tell they were holding back from running to her.

Patrina stepped forward, bowing to the Prince.

"Welcome back, My Lord. I hope you had a pleasant trip. Several deliveries from the palace have been made."

"Where is it?"

"It was put in your room, as ordered, My Lord."

Kairen nodded and walked into the castle. Cassandra thought he didn't need her, but just when she was parting ways with him to go greet the girls, the Prince turned around.

"Cassandra. Come."

A bit surprised, she followed after him. Did he need her to unpack or something? She wished she could have greeted the others before going upstairs. The Prince seemed impatient though. He climbed the stairs up to his room so fast she could barely follow in his footsteps. When they finally arrived, five large chests were in the room, as Patrina had said. Kairen walked up to the closest one and opened it.

"Cassandra."

She walked up to him to look at the contents. She found herself speechless. Jewelry! So many emeralds, diamonds, other gems, and gold she could have gone blind. What was all this? This was worth so much! Kairen frowned upon seeing her shocked expression.

"You don't like those?"

"What? My Lord, this is..."

"From my father. They said you would be rewarded, didn't they? It came late."

Cassandra suddenly remembered the very short moment when two servants had indeed mentioned a reward, back at the Palace, for becoming the War God's

Concubine. However, she only expected a few gold coins, not five big chests full of treasures!

A bit unable to process what she was seeing, she slowly took out a few of the items present, one by one. There were so many, she could barely believe her eyes. She had a long necklace with emeralds in one hand and something like a gold tiara in the other. She tried to count, but the numbers and the thought of the overall price made her dizzy. There was every type of jewelry one could think of. From bracelets, necklaces, earrings, rings, even toe rings, to tiaras, and hairpins. She had never seen so much in one place. And all of these were meant for her?

Cassandra got up and opened another one of the chests. Unlike the first that she found full of jewelry, this one was filled with dresses. Luxurious, warm, and deep red dresses, all aligned there. She got on her knees and took one out, too curious. This dress had nothing in common with her current attire. They were both red dresses, but the one Cassandra was currently wearing looked very shabby and dull in comparison. The dress she had taken out of the chest was a deep, beautiful red, and was very detailed too. There were embroideries and thin little gems in it, making it shine subtly whenever it moved.

“It’s beautiful...” she whispered to herself, impressed with the craftsmanship.

“They are all yours. No more dirty dresses.”

He opened the last two chests for her to see. The fourth one was filled with dresses as well, in every shade of red that existed. Apparently, she wouldn’t have to wear any white anymore. The last chest contained little boxes and bottles, mostly perfumes, creams, and makeup. The kind her previous mistress had by the hundreds, and abused everyday to keep herself pretty. Cassandra wasn’t too fond of those, however. Some of the products in the Empire were expensive and not so useful, sometimes having very strong smells but not much benefit to the skin. Maybe she could try to make her own, now that she could access the herbs she wanted.

Kairen walked up to her, crouching down to her level.

“You don’t like those?”

“I... love them. They are very beautiful. Thank you, My Lord.”

A faint smile appeared on Kairen’s face, as he caressed her hair gently.

“They are from my father. No more dirt.”

Cassandra knew he was talking about the horrid state of the white dress she wore on their first encounter. The young concubine could still vividly remember the terrible color the water turned when she washed it. These dresses had nothing to do with the cheap white linen she had known for most of her life. Cassandra couldn't even recognize all the fabrics in there. She knew some master creators held the secret to fabrics like the celestial silk or the heavenly wool.

She was completely impressed with how fast these had been delivered here, and in such quantity too. There was plenty enough for one woman! She didn't even know where she could put these. Was she supposed to keep all those in the chests?

"Don't you want to change?" asked Kairen, a bit impatient.

She nodded, yes. Those dresses were probably more befitting of the winter weather anyways. Was that kept in mind when they sent those to her? She took a few minutes picking one, and noticed there were both winter and summer dresses in there. She had so many choices! On a rough estimate, there were about thirty dresses. She finally chose one that looked warm enough and not overly luxurious to put on.

It was long and a darker red with extra layers to keep her warm, only showing off her shoulders and collar line. There were embroideries and little gems around her chest, on the arms, and on the fur around the skirt and wrists.

As Cassandra tried it on, it was obvious the dress was a perfect fit on her. Was it tailored? Moreover, it was her first time wearing such a fine-quality item. The fabric was very soft on her skin, and the color was beautiful. She really liked it, though she felt a bit shy wearing such an expensive dress. She turned around to show it to Kairen.

But the Prince was frowning a bit. Cassandra felt a bit sad that he wasn't too enthusiastic about her outfit. She had wished that he would find her prettier in those.

"What is it, Your Highness? Don't you like it?"

"This color. It doesn't suit you."

Cassandra looked down. Did he not like red? She couldn't change though. All the dresses were red, different shades of red, but still red. She looked at herself in the large mirror in the room. She could see what he meant. With pale skin, green eyes, and brown hair, cold colours suited her more. This deep red was a bit too much.

There wasn't anything they could do about it though. The Empire was very color-coded when it came to the official outfits. In the Empire, slaves wore white, common

people wore colors from yellow to dark brown, servants wore blue or green depending on their masters and statuses, and the Officials wore grey or black according to their ranks. The Concubines could only wear two colors: red or pink. Cassandra was only a low-ranked concubine, thus red was her colour. Pink would have complemented her better, but it wasn't something she could access for now.

There were several ways to become a High-ranking Concubine: be of noble birth, do something that would benefit the Empire and the Emperor could reward her for it, or bear Kairen a child. While the first one was impossible for her, she couldn't access the last two for now either.

“Would you rather me keep wearing white, My Lord?”

This only made Kairen frown more. He shook his head, holding out his hand for her to take. She joined him.

“It's fine for now. We'll work on making you a high-ranking Concubine later. ”

“Goodness... Don't you have enough now?”

Nebora was frowning while looking at everything Cassandra had bought. Three full baskets of medicinal herbs on the little chariot behind them. The concubine was still looking at the stalls, smelling more herbs and observing the products. Cassandra chuckled.

“Not yet. This is my first time seeing a market in the North, and we rode two hours to get here. I should make sure I don't miss anything before we go, shouldn't I?”

“You're a really strange woman. You have five chests full of riches, yet all you care about are spices and herbs.”

Cassandra had never really cared for those things. The young girls at the castle however, had been excited to check out her new dresses and jewelry, and even played with it when the Prince wasn't around. She had fun reuniting with the other girls and answering their endless questions about the military camp and soldiers. It was like she had gotten a lot of younger sisters all at once.

Nebora, however, was two years older and more composed. She was a bit interested in the jewelry, but didn't dare touch it. She only helped Cassandra tie her hair up with golden hairpins and suggested a couple of bracelets for her to wear.

When the young concubine had insisted on going to the nearest village, she had been the only one allowed to go with her. The other servant girls had much work to do with the Prince back, and Patrina had made sure to keep them busy. After Kairen agreed, Cassandra and Nebora had left with only a chariot and a horse they borrowed from the castle.

“I’m still curious on how you got His Highness to let you go alone,” said Nebora.

“It’s only a couple of hours by foot. He can be there in ten minutes if he flies. And I doubt anything will happen here.”

She moved on to the next stall where the man greeted her with a polite smile despite his eyes being riveted on her red dress.

“Well, with the Army so close, no bandits are stupid enough to come to this area, but we still have wild beasts, you know.”

“You said they only come out at night.”

“That’s why we better be back before nightfall.”

“Yes, yes...”

Cassandra grabbed a batch of herbs, which were dry, and caressed it between her fingers. It was from the smallest basket on the stall, and he only had half a dozen of those. She slowly smelled it. She addressed the man selling it.

“Lavender?”

“Yes, My Lady. My Lady knows well!”

“You don’t grow that here, do you?”

“My sister grows those a bit further south, My Lady. We cannot grow much here, but those travel a long time...”

“Is it still good if it’s dry?” asked Nebora with a frown.

“Lavender is great,” replied Cassandra, handing her the little batch. “Any flower can be dried and used like that.”

“Can you eat it?”

“It’s mostly used to perfume things. You can make beauty products, incense, and perfumes. Lavender is good for calming the nerves and relaxing the body, in small amounts.”

The merchant whistled after listening to Cassandra’s explanation.

“My Lady, you’re very knowledgeable! Most folks in this area wouldn’t even know what this is called! Give me a second!”

He looked at the back of his stall for something while Cassandra gathered money to pay for her purchase. Fortunately, Patrina had already converted the gold bar into money and given her a good amount of it. There was so much though, that despite everything they had bought that day she hadn’t even used a third of it yet.

“Here it is! My Lady, do you know this?”

The man handed her what seemed like a batch of black paper. Cassandra’s eyes opened wide in surprise when she took it.

“Is that...dry seaweed?”

“It is! I knew you’d recognize it!”

“Dry seaweed?” asked Nebora, completely lost.

“It’s plants from the sea you let dry and you can eat.”

“Eat? You want to eat this black stuff?”

Cassandra chuckled and tore a little bit to eat. It was salty but as good as the one she had known in her childhood. Better even. Nebora was baffled, but the merchant smiled from ear to ear.

“It was imported from very, very far in the South, but it stays dry and edible! I bought it a while ago, but it’s hard to sell to the people around here. They are wary of what they don’t know.”

“How much do you have?” asked Cassandra.

“Here we go again,” sighed Nebora.

“You know, it’s good for keeping the body young,” said the young concubine.

“Young?”

Nebora frowned, but took one of the sheets, observing it with curiosity. She hesitated a bit before tasting it, but seemed confused.

“What an odd taste...”

“I’ll cook it, you’ll see.”

Cassandra took a while discussing it with the merchant, who was happy to see someone so knowledgeable. The young concubine was ecstatic too. Nebora knew Cassandra was holding herself back from buying too many herbs, but she didn’t understand why. It wasn’t like the Prince was going to be anywhere near poor even if she bought the whole market! Besides, most of the purchases weren’t even for herself, but for cooking for everyone or creating new medicine. She really was an odd one.

Suddenly, a shadow flew over the sky. Everyone at the market raised their heads.

“Isn’t that His Highness’ Dragon?”

“It is...”

The merchants, afraid, ran to take cover. Neither of the two women moved, their eyes cast upwards. The black dragon didn’t stop, however. It was headed further, and didn’t even look down their way. Cassandra frowned.

“Is he going to hunt? So far?”

“That was the direction of the palace,” said Cassandra, intrigued as well.

She couldn’t see if Kairen was on his dragon’s back from that distance. Yet she had an odd feeling about this. They watched the beast’s silhouette until it was too far, then she turned to Nebora.

“Let’s go back.”

“Okay. It’s getting late anyway, we better go now if we want to arrive before night time.”

They quickly finished purchasing what they needed, filled their chariot, and got on their way back. It wasn’t an easy path back to the castle as it wasn’t used often, but it was wide enough and their horse knew its way.

However, as Nebora had feared, the sun went down fast behind the mountains. They were still far away from the castle when the temperatures fell and both women tightened their coats around them. Nebora had the horse speed up, though the night was clear and a thin coat of snow was surrounding them. Thanks to that and the moonlight, they saw clearly ahead of them, but the castle was still far behind the winter trees.

Nebora was looking more and more worried, continuing to glance around while hurrying the horse.

“What kind of beasts are there?” asked Cassandra, worried as well.

“We’ll be lucky if it’s only wolves.”

What could there be out there worse than wolves? Cassandra looked around too, looking for any animal that could be lurking from behind the trees, from the deep darkness in the forest. Cassandra couldn’t tell how far they were from the castle, but Nebora’s worried look spoke volumes. Not close enough.

Suddenly, she noticed a growl on their left, somewhere behind them. Cassandra turned around, only spotting a couple of eyes in the dark, but not the beast they belonged to.

“What’s that!”

“Something looking for fresh meat,” sighed Nebora. “They won’t attack yet, but they are following. They’re hungry. Come on, hurry up!”

She had the horse accelerate, but with their weight the poor thing was already doing its best. Cassandra heard more creatures coming after them, rushing in the snow, growling hungrily. Could they outrun them and get to the castle in time?

“Nebora! Watch out!”

One of the beasts jumped at them, all claws out, but Nebora dodged right in time and it hit the chariot instead. Cassandra saw it though and it wasn’t a wolf at all.

“Snow leopards! Damn it!”

The snow leopards were white with dark brown spots, explaining how Cassandra struggled to spot them among the snow and trees. Their fur was a perfect camouflage

in this landscape. Except for their glowing eyes, they weren't hard to see at all. But they were much scarier than wolves!

"Those damn things are faster than wolves or horses," said Nebora. "They must be hungry, they don't usually come down from the mountain this time of the year."

Cassandra tried to think of something to distract them, but they hadn't gotten much food from the market and surely nothing that would look more appetizing than a horse and two humans!

"Let's abandon the chariot!"

"What?"

Cassandra grabbed the knife under her skirt and used it to cut the ropes, only letting Nebora handle the reins.

"Jump on the horse!"

Her friend hesitated for a second before obeying, unsure. She landed safely and looked back, holding her hand out for Cassandra to take. She hurriedly joined her on the horse's back, as the chariot was abandoned in the snow behind them.

"Crap..." said Nebora, looking at all their purchases scattered around.

At least this mess, and the chariot falling back disturbed the felines enough for the horse to get some distance. She was faster with only two women on her back, both of them not too heavy either.

As the servant had said, it wasn't long until the snow leopards caught up to them though. Cassandra heard their growls only a few seconds after they had parted with the chariot, and looked back.

Three of them were chasing behind in a triangle formation waiting for the right moment. Cassandra was at the back, if the leopards attacked they would either get her or the horse.

"Cassandra! Look!"

To her surprise, Nebora was pointing forward. After a few seconds Cassandra saw it. A large human figure standing in the middle of the road ahead of them. She couldn't see his features, but she still knew instantly.

“His Highness.”

Kairen stood there waiting, two swords in his hands. When the two women and their horse crossed his path he didn't flinch, his black eyes fixated on the creatures behind them.

The snow leopards didn't miss the new target in front of them. The large human standing still was such easy prey. However, as they approached, some of the felines slowed down by mere instinct. Two young ones didn't though. They jumped at the same time.

Blood stained the snow and the felines dropped dead at the Prince's feet. Their peers growled, angry. Some were still lurking around, but were either too smart or listening to their instincts. They didn't dare approach within reach of the Prince's swords.

Cassandra wasn't sure if they were supposed to wait for him, but Nebora didn't stop. She watched the silhouette as they rode away. Once they arrived at the castle a few minutes later, Patrina and the girls ran to them.

“Lady Cassandra! Nebora! How could you come back so late?! Are you both alright?”

“We're fine, Patrina,” sighed Nebora. “Just had a big fright.”

“His Highness stayed behind,” said Cassandra, worried.

“Don't worry about him,” replied the old woman. “Come on, come inside and drink some hot tea, both of you. You're freezing...”

“I'm damn sweating!” groaned Nebora. “That was the most hellish ride of my life. I need a bath. And Olive deserves a treat too.”

Cassandra patted the poor horse. It had been very brave to bring them both back safely. Marian and Helmond hurried to take care of the horse, taking it back to the stables, while Bina and Prunie accompanied the women to the kitchen. Patrina made some hot wine for both of them to drink after Nebora insisted. Cassandra, however, couldn't swallow anything. She was too worried for her Prince.

“Don't worry, Lady Cassandra, His Highness is too strong!” said Bina.

“She's right, you know,” added Nebora. “He won't be taken down by a few big cats. He'll be back perfectly fine in a couple of hours, you'll see.”

However, Kairen wasn't back two hours later. Cassandra, who had finally drank some wine and was exhausted, even fell asleep in the kitchen waiting for him. Nebora helped her up to the bedroom since she was half-asleep.

"Don't worry, sleep. He'll be fine."

Cassandra couldn't find a peaceful sleep. Why wasn't he back yet? And where had Krai gone, so far from its owner...?

The next morning Cassandra woke up early, around sunrise. Someone was slowly caressing her hair and bare skin. Remembering the events of the previous day, she opened her eyes and checked around, worried.

"My Lord!"

Kairen was indeed there, on the side of the bed, sitting there while watching her. She jumped, her arms wrapping around his neck to hold him, letting out all her worries from the previous night. Cassandra was so worried, she even checked his torso for injuries, but he only had a couple of thin black scale lines on his arms, already healing themselves. She let out a long sigh of relief and the Prince put his hand around her neck.

"I was so worried."

"You're fine now."

Didn't he understand that she was worried about him at all? He only kept looking at her for a long time, like he was trying to capture her face in his mind, until Cassandra blushed. Kairen seemed a bit odd this morning.

"Is there something wrong, My Lord?"

"No."

He got up and brought her one of the usual gold trays, with fruits, meat, and cheese. Cassandra was a bit lost though and ignored the food. She tried to think of what could be wrong.

"When did you get back, My Lord? I meant to wait for you, but I fell asleep..."

"Late in the night."

"Did you get any sleep at all?" she asked, worried.

“I did.”

She frowned. She couldn't even tell if he had slept beside her, she was too exhausted herself. Suddenly, she thought of something else.

“Is your dragon back yet?”

Kairen immediately frowned slightly.

“Not yet...He will be here soon.”

Was the problem with Krai then? Cassandra couldn't help but worry about its absence. It didn't seem usual for the dragon to leave, and go so far away and for so long, without its master. Did that explain Kairen's odd behavior this morning?

Probably no one else but Cassandra would have noticed anything was different with the Prince, but she was sure. He even seemed a bit...uneasy. She grabbed a bit of food, eating in silence, lost in her thoughts. Kairen didn't say a word either, watching her eat, sometimes taking some meat as well.

After a while, a little knock was heard on the door.

“Your Highness? May I come in?”

Nebora walked in as soon as Kairen gave permission, bringing in hot water and soap for Cassandra. Kairen got up and left without a word, leaving his concubine even more confused than before. She turned to Nebora.

“Nebora! Do you know what's going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know. His Highness is acting...odd.”

Her friend frowned, turning her head towards where the Prince had just left.

“Odd? How so? Come, I'll help you bathe.”

It was weird to have her own friend help her take a bath, but Cassandra didn't say no. She had gone to bed quite dirty last night and this was more than welcome. She got into the bath, where Nebora poured the hot water, and started washing herself.

“I don't know, he seems uneasy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Cassie. His Highness isn’t like usual? I couldn’t tell the difference. But the dragon isn’t back yet. Maybe it has to do with that. We saw it leave in the direction of the palace, didn’t we? Perhaps something happened there? I guess we won’t know until it comes back. Oh, I’ll wash your hair too, give me that.”

She let Nebora tend to her and help her wash her long brown hair, trying to relax a bit. Maybe she was just worrying too much and it was nothing. Yet she couldn’t shake off this feeling that something big was about to happen.

“He retrieved our stuff, by the way.”

“His Highness?”

“Yeah. He came back late last night with the chariot and everything in it! I already took your herbs to the storage, as we had discussed. Oh, and he even killed some snow leopards! It’s awesome, do you know how expensive their fur is? We can make you some great coats with that!”

Cassandra didn’t feel much about getting a snow leopard coat, but she was impressed by her Prince once more. He had managed to kill several of those beasts all by himself and carry their cart back home? The War God was truly worthy of his title!

Once she was done bathing, Nebora picked a new red dress for her and insisted that Cassandra wear some jewelry. After a bit of arguing, she was made to wear some little ruby earrings and a gold hairpin. Nebora even helped her apply a bit of lip balm and scented cream on her neck.

Cassandra felt a bit odd wearing so much, but she was prettier than ever. When she and Nebora got down to the castle’s open area, Marian and Prunie ran to them, all sparkles in their eyes.

“Cassandra, you look so pretty!”

“Are those real rubies?”

“Hands off!” said Nebora. “Don’t forget, Cassandra is our friend, but she’s also His Highness’ Concubine. Don’t touch her stuff with your dirty hands!”

“Nebora, you meanie!”

Cassandra chuckled at the girls' bickering. She had missed all of them, and insisted on making some tea for them. They walked to the kitchen, meeting the rest of the castle's staff there. Cassandra brought out some of her new herbs to make tea, all the younger girls watching her with expectation.

"It smells so good!" said Bina, humming.

"It's citrus and mint tea," explained Cassandra before serving them.

"A Concubine shouldn't be pouring tea for servants," said Patrina with a frown.

Nebora rolled her eyes at her.

"Who cares, it's just tea and we are the only ones here."

"Do you know where Krai or His Highness are?" asked Cassandra to Patrina.

"His Highness just went to the dragon's field. His dragon might be coming back soon."

"The dragon's field?"

"More like his playground," explained Nebora. "It's the black dragon's favorite spot, it usually lands there instead of directly inside the castle like last time."

Cassandra immediately put down her teapot and grabbed her coat again, hurrying outside. Did this mean Krai was about to come back? Nebora and Prunie ran after her, but she was walking too fast. Nebora helped her find her a way outside to a little hill, where indeed, her Prince was standing still, a hand on his sword. He was looking at the sky when Cassandra walked up to him.

"My Lord?" she softly called him.

"Cassandra. What are you doing outside?"

It wasn't so cold though and she walked easily through the thin coat of snow to get to him. He grabbed her as soon as she was in his reach, pulling her against him.

"Are you waiting for Krai to come back, My Lord?"

"Look."

She turned her head up to where he was hinting at, a little dark shape appeared a couple of seconds later in the sky. Krai! It was obviously a dark dragon and she recognized its large size and way of agitating its tail even from such a distance. How high was it? It was slowly going down to them, getting closer with each flap of its wings. Cassandra felt her heart warm up a little as the dragon was coming down.

Something felt wrong, however. Krai was more agitated than usual. What was going on? It took her a while to realize a silhouette was standing on its back. Did the black dragon usually let someone ride it? Who was that?

With Krai coming closer, preparing to land, she finally recognized the feminine silhouette, totally surprised.

“...Princess Shareen?”

A minute later, there was no more place for doubt. Krai landed swiftly, though it immediately ran to Cassandra, disregarding its rider.

Imperial Princess Shareen didn't seem to be unbalanced, however. She got down with a little jump, landing perfectly on the snow. She was wearing a sexy purple dress and a little fur cape on her shoulders. She smirked upon seeing Cassandra, and Kairen next to her.

“Sister.”

“Hello, handsome. Happy to see your older sister?”

“Shut it. How did it go?”

Shareen stopped smiling, crossing her arms.

“Not as we expected, unfortunately. Someone took it before us.”

Kairen's anger on his face scared even Cassandra, who had no idea what was going on. She slowly stepped aside, as Krai kept nudging her with its head, growling softly, repeatedly asking for her attention.

“Who?” asked her Prince, not hiding his anger.

“Not one of our siblings. Vrehan was furious and Sephir had no idea. Anour even tried to help me retrieve it, but someone else got into the vault first. They left a clue though.”

She stepped to him and gave him a little diamond. Kairen's anger seemed to calm down, as Shareen smiled.

"Bitchy as ever, isn't she?"

"Better her than anyone else."

Cassandra, who couldn't take it anymore, stepped forward again, glancing at the little diamond in Kairen's hand.

"My Lord, could you tell me what's going on? Something was stolen? From the Emperor's vault?"

"It doesn't belong to our father, but to you, sweetie."

"To me?"

Cassandra was confused. Why would something of hers ever be in the Emperor's vault in the first place? She had no idea what was going on. Shareen smirked and stepped closer to her with a cunning expression.

"You don't know, do you, sweetie? What's in our Imperial Father's vault?"

Cassandra shook her head, a bit lost. Behind her, Krai growled at Shareen, annoyed, but the Princess ignored it, playing with a strand of Cassandra's hair around her finger.

"Our Imperial Father keeps everything in a very secret place, especially everything about dragons. That vault is kept by Glahad, our father's dragon, because it's connected to the Dragon's Nest."

"A nest?"

"This Empire's most precious things are Imperial Dragons," continued Shareen, "and their eggs. When a dragon is ready to have its egg, it goes to the nest, lays its egg, and protects it. So our father always knows when another dragon will be born."

Cassandra was completely astonished. She had no idea. She turned to Krai, putting the pieces together.

"You're saying... Krai went back to the Palace to ..."

"Lay an egg," said Kairen.

She was starting to understand, looking at the black dragon. But, dragons were linked to Imperial Family members? So, Krai laying an egg meant...

“Congrats,” said Shareen with that little smirk of hers. “You’re having my brother’s brat.”

Cassandra was floored. She was pregnant? With her Prince’s baby? And Krai having an egg was proof of that? She turned to the dragon, which was still acting all clingy, asking for scratches from her. Kairen was still frowning though.

“But...What happened to Krai’s egg, then?” she asked, worried.

“Somebody stole it before I got there,” explained Shareen. “Once an egg appears, it becomes a race to see who will get to it first.”

“Why would someone steal an egg?” asked Cassandra, confused.

“To try and destroy it,” explained Kairen. “If our son’s dragon is killed, he won’t be acknowledged as an heir to the throne.”

“No one wants Kairen to have an heir. Everyone knows Father would pick him as the next Emperor right away,” sighed Shareen. “So, as soon as Krai had it, it was obvious everyone would try to get that egg. Someone got there before me though.”

Cassandra glanced at the diamond. Who then? And what did they want with it?

“Who did...”

“Our mother,” growled Kairen. “That old witch stole it.”

Cassandra was going a bit whiter than usual. She was pregnant with an Imperial Baby! Kairen’s baby, and a little Prince, too, since only sons were born with a dragon... She couldn’t believe it. They had been together for only a few weeks! And someone had already stolen the baby’s dragon egg?

“Cassandra.”

Her Prince’s voice barely reached her. Everything was going too fast, too confusing. She slowly started going down, but Kairen caught her before her legs gave way completely. Krai was agitated around them, too. Going in circles around her, growling a bit. The War God carried her, turning to the castle to walk back.

Nebora was worried about her, biting her lips and frowning, yet she didn't dare to suggest anything on the way back. All four of them got back to Kairen's bedroom, where he helped Cassandra sit on his bed, Nebora immediately kneeling at her side. She put her arms around her stomach, frowning a bit.

"So I really am...pregnant? With His Highness' child?"

Shareen rolled her eyes.

"Unless he fucked someone else around here, yes, sweetie. An egg means a pregnancy and it was definitely Krai's. Hence, the brat is his Master's. And our mother wouldn't have bothered with it if it was anyone else's."

"Why would your mother take it?" asked Cassandra. "Shouldn't it stay with the dragon who...had it?"

"If you want it dead within three days, yes. Our father's vault is open to any Imperial Family Member, since it's guarded by Glahad. And his dragon will let any of his children in. That's six Princes and about twenty Princesses, mind you. And I wouldn't trust any of them near a dragon egg."

So any of their siblings could be after her baby...and his egg. Since she was living so far away, protected in the Onyx Castle, Cassandra had almost forgotten what a scary and dangerous place the Imperial Palace could be. She felt something cold inside her heart, a wave of fear surrounding her. This baby was only a few days old! What else would she have to face from now on? Could it be born safely?

Just when she was overwhelmed by those thoughts, Kairen surrounded her with his large thick fur cloak, covering her shoulders. She looked up at him, but her Prince had this dark look in his eyes. A War God expression. Cassandra took a deep breath in. She wasn't alone.

"Father wasn't too happy either," said Princess Shareen. "I bet Mother did it behind his back. His other concubines must be pissed, but at least they won't dare act against her."

"That damn woman," growled Kairen.

"It's still better with her than at the Palace," argued his sister.

"Can't we retrieve it?" asked Cassandra.

The siblings turned their eyes to her. Shareen crossed her arms with a smirk.

“Our mother is a stubborn bitch. She probably didn’t take that egg just to have it as a decoration. Kairen never visits her.”

That last sentence was actually directed at her brother, who was still frowning. Seeing as he wasn’t responding, Shareen shrugged and laid on the bed next to Cassandra, her hands behind her head.

“Anyway, I’ve done my share. I think I’ll stay here for a while. I’m bored of the Palace and your flying lizard is probably not taking me back anytime soon. Do you have any pretty girls? Other than this one.”

She said that, pointing at Nebora, who promptly looked away. Cassandra decided to ignore Shareen’s antics and turned to Kairen. She didn’t really grasp what was truly at stake, but this egg was her child’s future dragon. She hated not being able to confirm it was safe. Cassandra stood up and took a couple of steps to reach Kairen’s side, taking the Prince’s hand between hers.

“My Lord, please...can we at least make sure the egg is safe?”

For a while the Prince remained silent, his eyes stuck somewhere else. Then he turned to her.

“Are you content?”

His question took her by surprise. She had expected anything but that. What was he asking about? She couldn’t understand until Kairen silently put his large hand on her stomach. She blushed. He meant her pregnancy! Cassandra hadn’t even had time to think about this. What were her feelings on this matter? She was pregnant, expecting a child at seventeen! And an Imperial Baby, no less. Just a few weeks ago, Kairen had taken her virginity, but she hadn’t even had time to picture herself bearing his children. She knew men of power needed heirs, but she wasn’t even yet accustomed to the idea of being his concubine!

Yet...Cassandra was clear on how lucky she was. Of all people, Kairen was a strong and powerful man, yet he acted unexpectedly nice and gentle to her. After years of slavery, she had risen to the concubine status in just a few days. Moreover, she wasn’t with a cruel or brutal man, but with him.

No, having his children wasn't anything bad. On the contrary, her feelings toward him had already blossomed, like tiny, shy flowers hidden in her heart. Bearing her Prince's child was a surprise and a blessing.

Cassandra slowly nodded, showing a gentle, serene smile. Kairen seemed relieved for a second, and kissed her gently.

"How boring," said his sister's annoyed voice behind them. "Are you going to see Mother then? I can't handle much more mushy stuff unless you move on to my favorite part. You know, the hot part."

Kairen glared at his sister.

"You are coming, too."

"Oh hell no, Brother. I think I'll stay here and enjoy my time with your..."

"Shareen."

His sister glared at him, but Kairen's voice did not allow another refusal from her. Cassandra felt a bit awkward, stuck between the Imperial Siblings. Nebora rolled her eyes, hoping they would just make a decision soon. Eventually, Shareen got up with a growl, her hands on her hips.

"Fine!"

She walked out, unhappy, the diamonds on her purple dress glittering as she left the room. Was she immune to the cold as well? Anyway, Cassandra was left alone with Kairen and Nebora in the room after the Princess' unhappy departure. Her servant friend got up and selected another coat for her from the closet, a large brown one.

"My mother lives an hour away," said Kairen.

"Not in the Palace?"

"Only when she feels like it."

What kind of woman could their mother be? Cassandra put on the coat, realizing it was a bit thinner than the previous one, as they were probably heading back to the South. Once she was ready, Kairen accompanied her downstairs, where Shareen was already waiting with a pout.

Next to her, Krai almost jumped to Cassandra as soon as it saw her. She smiled, caressing the huge snout. Was it acting more clingy than usual because of the baby?

Kairen cut short the dragon petting, helping her climb up its back and positioning himself behind her. Shareen, still on the ground, was unhappy.

“Damn it...”

She eventually climbed up too, behind her brother. Krai took off swiftly, Kairen firmly holding on to her, as Cassandra tried not to be as afraid as usual by the flight. She was always impressed by the height, but had learned to watch the horizon instead of the ground, and take deep breaths.

“Imperial Princesses aren’t born with...dragons?” she asked Kairen.

“No.”

“We have other talents, rather than taming flying lizards,” answered Shareen from behind him.

She didn’t bother to say what though. Did girls have something to compensate for not being born with dragons? She had heard some of the Imperial Family had heavenly powers. Was it magic? So far, Cassandra had thought Shareen was like any woman, besides her birth status in the Imperial Family, obviously.

Resting against Kairen’s chest and lost in her thoughts, she barely realized the trip was already coming to an end. Krai was flying low, over what seemed like a large village. In their line of sight, another castle was waiting. More like a palace, it was a light grey color with gold on its roof and lots of ivy everywhere. It was unlike anything Cassandra had seen before. It wasn’t as hot as the Capital, or as cold as the Onyx Castle’s location, hence the scenery was very green, filled with trees and plants. Cassandra immediately felt drawn to it.

The black dragon landed outside the castle, in what was apparently a large courtyard. Kairen helped Cassandra down, and she realized it was indeed a bit warmer here, though she still needed her coat. The air was filled with nice floral scents too. It was nothing like the stuffed and overwhelming Capital streets, or the desertic area around the Onyx Castle.

An old woman ran to them, followed by a handful of lower ranked maids.

“Welcome, Imperial Prince Kairen, Imperial Princess Shareen. The Imperial Concubine Mother is waiting for you.”

Only then did she notice Cassandra, who had been standing behind Kairen. The old woman immediately bowed again.

“Welcome, Imperial Concubine.”

This title felt very strange to Cassandra’s ears. However, she didn’t have to answer, the siblings confidently walked into the castle and Cassandra followed, a bit impressed.

This palace was very different. First, there weren’t many enclosed areas. Every room had large openings and ivy running freely through the walls. It seemed as if most of those rooms had been abandoned and left to nature’s goodwill until they reached the higher areas. Climbing a few stairs, they entered a spacious room with a balcony and a large table in the middle. It took a second for Cassandra to realize that the table was shining, the wood covered with thousands of little diamonds.

But most impressive, behind that table, on a large purple sofa, was sitting a tall woman. She had dark skin, her long hair was dyed a dark red shade and pulled up in a very artistic and complex hairdo, and wore a dark pink dress. Her thin lips were dark red, and her eyes were glaring at her children.

“Imperial Concubine Kareen, this is...”

“You think I wouldn’t recognize my own children? No matter how unwilling they are to be here, they are still mine.”

Her cold voice had the old woman and maids bow even lower. Her glare was still directed at Shareen and Kairen though.

“So? Nothing to say to your mother, after ignoring her for two years?”

“Where is the egg?” asked Kairen coldly.

His mother crossed her arms.

“That’s it, Son of mine? Nothing else to say? You even went ahead and had the guts to get a concubine without my consent. You weren’t so daring before. And you, Shareen? How many times have you ignored me?”

“I would see you more often if you came to the Palace, dear Mother,” sighed the Princess.

“How impudent. I am the parent. I gave birth to both of you, shouldn’t you show some respect and at least visit me, instead of having me go all the way there?”

“Father misses you,” added Shareen with a smirk.

Her mother’s grey eyes got even darker.

“See if I care about that old man!”

Cassandra was almost hiding behind Kairen, impressed by their fiery mother. This woman had such a temper! No one in this country would dare to say a bad word about the Emperor, yet she was throwing a fit so openly. Kairen and Shareen seemed used to it though, as neither of them reacted.

The Imperial Concubine took a deep breath, then her eyes fell on Cassandra.

“Is that her? Your young concubine they mentioned?”

Cassandra had no idea how to react. Who was “they”? She slowly stepped forward, seeing as no one was stopping her. Kairen was still close though, thus she felt a bit more confident. His mother wasn’t too satisfied though.

“Come here, child. Let me see you from up close.”

The Imperial Concubine’s tone didn’t leave Cassandra with much of a choice. Seeing how her Prince didn’t react, the young Concubine walked closer to his mother, wondering what was expected of her.

“Let’s see.”

As soon as she was close enough, Concubine Kareen stood up to face her, and Cassandra realized how tall the woman really was. She looked a lot like her children too, with her tanned skin, straight nose, and angular jaw.

“She is too thin. Even for a slave. And your skin is very white. Are you from the south, child?”

“Yes, Imperial Concubine,” said Cassandra, bowing slightly.

“Do not bow so low! You are an Imperial Concubine. Hold your rank. You look like anyone could trample all over you.”

Cassandra blushed and straightened her back. The Imperial Concubine slowly walked around her, scrutinizing everything for what seemed like hours.

“These hips are so narrow. And you need to eat more. But, at least you’re pretty.”

Concubine Kareen let out a sigh and turned to her son.

“So? What is your excuse for not introducing her to your mother sooner, Kairen?”

But the Prince remained silent, only walking up to Cassandra to put an arm around her. His mother pursed her lips as she turned to Shareen.

“What about you, Daughter? Do you think I don’t know how you behave in the Palace?”

Shareen stayed silent like a child caught misbehaving, crossing her arms and looking everywhere else but at her mother.

“Mother. The egg.”

Kairen’s cold voice got his mother’s attention. She turned to him with her hands on her hips.

“Is that all you came for? Well, I’m not going to just hand it over that easily. You’ll all stay and have lunch with me for once. The one time you come to see your mother.”

She clapped her hands and a bunch of servants came in bowing.

“Actually, let’s have lunch now. In the Courtyard.”

Immediately, most of the servants rushed out to prepare their meal, only a few of them remained by the Imperial Concubine’s side. She let out a dramatic sigh and turned to her children again.

“You two better behave. I am too old to scold you.”

Cassandra couldn’t help but wonder how old she actually was. She didn’t look much older than her children! As Shareen and Kairen were probably in their mid-twenties, their mother could be about forty. Her make-up was lighter than what Cassandra had

witnessed on other women of that age, too. She was a natural and overwhelming beauty.

“Come, let’s go outside where it’s warm. You must be cold all the time, living in that dark place.”

Cassandra realized she was talking about the Onyx Castle. She followed after the Imperial Concubine, who was nonchalantly walking through the corridors to a large open area. As they walked, Cassandra noticed Kareen wasn’t wearing shoes under her long pink dress, but her bare feet didn’t seem to mind the uneven floor where the stone was sometimes crossed with patches of wild grass.

“Here, have a seat.”

The Imperial Concubine’s outdoor garden was a beautiful space. It had walls and pillars around it, but no roof. A few branches covered just enough of the sky to provide some shade and relief from the direct sun. It was like something out of a fairytale. The floor was only flowers and grass, and every surrounding inch had some green on it.

It seemed like the place had been abandoned for centuries to the wild, as the stones had weathered and ivy had taken over. Cassandra instantly loved it. Though she was feeling a bit shy and stuck close to Kairen, she couldn’t help but glance at every little wild flower there.

“Sit here, child. What is your name?”

Concubine Kareen gestured to the seat right next to her, startling Cassandra a bit. As she took the seat, Kairen sat across from her to his mother’s left. It was a round stone table of a decent size, not too big, but just cozy enough.

“Cassandra, Imperial Concubine,” she answered.

“Cassandra. You’ll call me Concubine Mother from now on.”

“Yes, Concubine Mother.”

Around them, the servants enthusiastically brought as much food as the table could hold. There was the usual cheese, meat, and fresh fruits, along with some dried fruits, vegetables, brown rice, and cakes. Just as Shareen was about to take some, a glare from her mother had her pull her hand back.

“Let’s drink first.”

Without delay, a glass of wine was placed into Cassandra’s hands.

“Mother, do not force her to drink,” said Kairen with a frown.

“It’s fine. I had a cup once in a while when I was pregnant with you. This one isn’t strong anyway, it’s mostly juice. She can have some tea next.”

Cassandra brought the smallest bit of wine to her lips and indeed, she did not taste the alcohol at all, only the sweet grape.

“Where are you from?” Concubine Kareen asked, as she took a sip of her own drink.

“From the Rain Tribe in the south. I was born there and was...brought to the Capital when I was a child, Concubine Mother.”

“A Southern Tribe? How interesting. Your people were known for wonders in medicine and agriculture. How shameful that such bright people disappeared over those barbaric wars. Had you achieved any proficiency before that?”

“I did. I use my medical knowledge at the Military Camp, Concubine Mother.”

Immediately, Imperial Concubine Kareen glared at her son.

“You took your concubine to the camp? Among so many men? I thought you knew better, Kairen!”

“She is my concubine. None of my men would dare to...”

“Of course not! But a military camp is still no place for a concubine! How selfish of you. You may be strong, but you underestimate others. Don’t you know how easy it is to die? You are being naive, my son. Your concubine doesn’t have the Dragon’s blood!”

Cassandra looked down. The Concubine Mother seemed acutely aware of the struggle to survive that common people face. She was visibly irritated with her son and kept glaring at him, though Kairen didn’t seem affected.

“Anyway. Your concubine shall stay here from now on.”

“No.”

Cassandra was caught between a new exchange of glares between mother and son, and they were totally overwhelming her. The Concubine Mother wanted her to stay here? Why? And for how long? Realizing her son wasn't going to give in, Kareen turned on him.

"You have grown up far too sheltered by your Father, Kairen. Do you know how hard it is to keep a child alive in this Empire? Your brothers will be after her like dogs after a bone! If she returns to the Palace, she will be killed within a day! If she stays at the Onyx Castle, I would give it a week before one of them sends an assassin after her. And the military camp? Even worse! They could bribe any one of your men to do the job for them!"

Cassandra felt her heart grow cold at the thought. The Imperial Concubine Mother was telling the truth. Sooner or later, this pregnancy would put her in grave danger; she turned her eyes to Kairen, who was looking at her too.

"I'll protect her."

"Kairen, I raised two children to adulthood, despite all your father's other concubines. Do you think I don't know what kind of world this is? I lost three of your siblings to those wenches!"

Three? Imperial Concubine Kareen had lost three children? The Concubine seemed to be a strong and powerful woman! But if she couldn't even protect all of her offspring... Cassandra was even more worried.

Cassandra turned to her, trying to control her fear.

"Concubine Mother, please. I'm... I really want to protect this child. Someone has already tried to steal Krai's egg, and..."

"Did they?" asked Kareen, looking at her daughter.

Shareen had a smirk.

"Of course they did. Vrehan was furious."

"Then thank the Imperial Dragon, I got there before them."

"How did you know, Mother?" asked Kairen.

She rolled her eyes at him.

“Do you think I was born yesterday, my son? I know you. You never showed interest in any of the previous concubines your father gave you. Now you pick a slave, of all people, out of the blue? I knew it wouldn’t be long until I had a grandchild on the way.”

For the first time, Kareen directed what could have been a little smile Cassandra’s way.

“Do not worry. I know the ways of the Palace, and those wenches won’t get near you or my grandson. You’ll be safe here, in the Diamond Palace.”

“She is not...”

“She will stay here, Kairen. For her safety, and the safety of your child.”

Cassandra was hesitant, but eventually she turned to the Concubine Mother.

“Concubine Mother, I am not sure. I still have many things I would like to do at the Onyx Castle and the military camp.”

“And what might those be?” asked Concubine Kareen, unhappy.

Cassandra took a deep breath and told her about the hospital in the mountain and the farming issues at the Onyx Castle. She spoke about everything she had done and everything she wanted to do in the next few months. It was a lot for even her to think she could do so much with her current situation, but Cassandra had taken things to heart.

The Concubine Mother remained silent, listening to her. Shareen was mindlessly eating in the background, but Kairen was listening to Cassandra too.

“I see. Well, you certainly aren’t a typical slave.”

Cassandra blushed a bit, wondering if this was meant to be a compliment. Kareen stayed silent for a while, looking at her with an enigmatic expression. Her dark eyes were harder to decipher than those of her children, Cassandra thought. After her silent contemplation, Kareen turned to Kairen.

“You picked well, Son. She has ambition, and the mind of an Empress.”

She then turned to Cassandra again without waiting for him to respond.

“Yet, that is a dangerous way to think. You are protected by this Empire’s War God and that is your only strength. Otherwise, this knowledge would get you killed. You know that, don’t you?”

Cassandra nodded.

Yes. Her knowledge and past were all too dangerous to expose in this Empire. Even with Kairen, who protected her, she had been hesitant to reveal the truth. The Imperial Concubine sighed.

“Fine. Bring it in!” She ordered a servant.

A few minutes later, the elderly woman from earlier brought in a large case, and put it at their feet. Cassandra suddenly sensed a tremendous presence over them at the same time Krai’s curious head popped over the wall, watching closely. Was the dragon interested in its egg?

The servant left and Concubine Kareen stood up and raised her hands to her head, plucking one of her hair pins out. Cassandra realized it was actually a very intricate key. Had she kept it there for safety? She opened the chest and Cassandra soon forgot her questions.

“There it is.”

The egg was simply laid on some soft leather, but it looked hard enough that it wouldn’t easily break. It was much larger than Cassandra had expected too! Bigger than any other animal’s egg, and about the length of her forearm. It was not black like she had imagined, but a shiny grey, almost silver-like. She had thought a dragon’s egg would be smooth, but it seemed to be covered in some strange substance, like a lustrous oily coating.

Cassandra couldn’t resist the desire to touch it and, to her surprise, it actually reacted! Like a magnetic pull, something inside briefly moved at the slight touch of her finger tips. She was in total awe.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” whispered Kareen. “Dragon Eggs are among the greatest wonders of this world...”

“When will it hatch?” asked Cassandra.

“When you give birth...if you do. Dragons are linked to their Masters. If the child dies before birth, the egg will use this coating to self-destruct.”

“What if the baby dies...after?”

Kareen's eyes darkened.

“Let's not have such somber talk. For now, we just need to make sure that your child sees the light of day in a few months' time. That is, if my son comes to his senses and allows you to remain here instead of behaving like a headstrong teenager...”

Kairen was glaring at his mother, visibly annoyed by her words. Cassandra, however, was hesitating. She was reluctant to part from Kairen, but for the sake of their baby, wouldn't it be better for her to stay here? How was the Concubine Mother so sure she would be safer in the Diamond Palace instead of the Onyx Castle?

Seeing her uncertainty, Kareen rolled her eyes.

“Enough! I haven't seen my children in a while. All three of you will stay here for a few days and I am not asking! Krai too.”

Hearing its name, the dragon turned its head to the Concubine Mother and purred softly in her direction as she smiled.

“That's right, I missed you too, little one.”

Cassandra wondered if Krai's attitude towards her meant Kairen loved his mother more than he let on. The Imperial Concubine turned to Cassandra again, frowning as she looked at her slave collar. She pointed it out with her finger, displeased.

“This! We need to get rid of this as well when we go to the Imperial Palace for the New Year celebration.”

Hearing this, Shareen almost choked on her wine. Kairen seemed shocked too.

“Mother, you will be going back? To see Father?”

“Who said anything about seeing that old man? I am going there to attend the celebrations, and to show off my future grandchild to all those whores at the Imperial Palace.”

“As if,” said Shareen. “If you show up without going to see Father, he'd send the entire army to fetch you!”

Her mother shrugged, not phased at all. Cassandra was speechless! Their mother was so strong-willed, she would even dare to ignore the Emperor himself! She then

instructed them to eat, essentially closing the topic. While eating her little bites, Cassandra tried to remember how much longer until the New Year celebrations. She felt like her time at the camp had been months, longer than the couple of weeks it actually was. As she took the time to count exactly how many days had passed, she realized the celebrations would be held only two months from now. How big would her baby be in two months? And the dragon's egg? Cassandra wondered if the Baby Dragon would look like a miniature Krai.

As they ate silently, Cassandra felt a bit more at ease. The Concubine Mother was a very strong-willed woman, scolding her children for bad posture, and was cold towards the servants. She was nice to Cassandra though, as if she respected her from the start, and ignored her slave status completely. She urged Cassandra to eat more though; insisting she consume more of the dry fruits as they were, according to Kareen, very nutritious for babies.

"Don't Southerners eat meat?" she asked, noticing Cassandra had barely touched it.

"No, Concubine Mother. I'm more used to eating fish...In small quantities, though."

"Hmpf. That explains your good skin, thin build, and character. It is said eating fish helps with all those. Too much meat makes children stubborn. Just look at these two."

Right as she said that, both Kairen and Shareen, who happened to have meat in their hand or mouth, sent glares back to their mother.

Kareen sighed. "Anyhow, just let me know what you want to eat, I'll have servants go fetch it for you."

"Actually...could I go buy it myself?" asked Cassandra, a bit embarrassed.

The Concubine Mother looked at her, confused.

"Why?"

"I just...I like going to the markets. Looking at the stalls, and all."

After a few seconds of contemplation, Kareen chuckled.

"You really are a new kind of concubine, aren't you? Fine, we'll go later. A little outing will do me some good as well. But first, dessert!"

Cassandra wondered exactly how much she was expected to eat! More delicious food was brought out - so many fruits, nuts and cakes that she had to drink some tea to help

it all go down. She would definitely get plump if she spent her pregnancy in the Diamond Castle!

After she was done eating, Concubine Kareen stood up, elegantly wiped her lips, and turned to her children.

“I’m going to take a walk in my garden. Don’t any of you even think of leaving. And anyway, I’ll be taking Krai with me.”

Under Cassandra’s surprised eyes, Kareen walked over to Krai’s head, caressing its snout. The dragon closed its eyes, growling softly like it usually did with Cassandra. It really seemed to like the Concubine Mother. She walked out of the Garden, using an opening between the stones to meet with the Dragon behind the wall. Though she couldn’t see Kareen anymore, Cassandra watched Krai as it bounded down from the wall, its big back turning around to follow her.

“This place is so boring,” sighed Shareen. “I’m going to take a nap in my room until Mother comes back.”

They watched as Shareen retired, leaving Cassandra alone with her Prince. So they couldn’t take the egg and leave while she was away, Kareen had locked it in the chest and had the servants take it back inside while they were dining.

Cassandra walked up to Kairen, who pulled her down to sit on his leg.

“We will get it back soon,” said the Prince, holding her by her waist.

“It’s okay. As long as it’s safe with Concubine Mother.”

Kairen nodded, caressing her long hair down her back.

“Do you want to stay here?” he asked softly.

“I’m not sure. I want to stay here, for our baby’s safety, but... I also want to take care of the hospital, and I know I’ll miss the girls at the Onyx Castle.”

He didn’t reply to that and instead gently kissed her shoulder, lost in his own thoughts. Since his mother had insisted that they stay a while, they could always decide later. She wouldn’t be able to keep Kairen here much longer and Cassandra would have to make her decision before then.

They stayed like this for a while, gently caressing and holding each other, lost in their own little world. Kairen seemed gentler and more caring since her pregnancy had

been announced, and Cassandra was feeling a bit more confident too. She even wondered if she could find people to teach medicine to here.

“Were you here often?” she asked, looking at the garden around them.

“When I was younger... My father gifted it to my mother after my birth. “

“This castle?”

“This city. It’s the place where she was born.”

The Imperial Family’s standards were truly too extravagant for her to grasp! Cassandra was once again speechless. So not just a castle, but a whole city was their mother’s? Shareen and Kairen had probably spent most of their childhoods here in that case.

“How did your mother become a concubine?”

“She worked as a servant for one of my father’s counselors. He noticed her. She was smarter than most, and not afraid to voice her opinion. She actually became his counselor for a while, before becoming his concubine.”

Cassandra nodded. The story suited his mother’s impressive character and also explained why she didn’t care much about Cassandra’s slave status, since she had been a servant herself. She truly was an admirable woman.

“Can we take a walk? I’d like to see the rest of the Castle.”

Kairen silently agreed and stood up, still holding her around her waist. Cassandra ventured back into the Castle, noticing two female servants silently following them from a few steps back. Had Kareen given instructions for the pair to attend to them? They strolled around for a while and the more Cassandra saw, the more she liked it. She had thought upon their arrival that it felt like this place had been abandoned for years and left to the wild. Few rooms were entirely enclosed and most had spaces where stones in the walls were missing or parts of the roof were open so that they were bright and airy. Ivy ran through the walls freely and trees grew up against the walls, their branches replacing missing sections of roof to provide some shade. Unlike the Imperial Palace, there weren’t many signs of wealth, except for a few richly decorated rooms. There was nothing else on display and even the furniture was very basic, made of just wood and comfortable fabrics.

To Cassandra’s surprise, Kairen pushed a large door open and they walked in.

“This is my room.”

It was rather empty despite all the available space, but had a large bath carved out in a corner with a fountain that had dried up. Kairen’s old bed was very much like the one at the Onyx Castle, large and with furs on it.

In another corner was what looked like a very large nest that was well worn out and tattered, and Cassandra guessed that this might have been Krai’s bed when he was younger...and smaller. Aside from those, there was only a wardrobe and a chest on a carpet in the other corner. It was even emptier than his bedroom in the Onyx Castle.

Cassandra ventured further inside, still more curious, while Kairen stayed a few steps back, watching her.

“So this is...where you grew up?”

“I liked it better than the Palace.”

“Why?” she asked inquisitively.

“Less people. Only Mother and us.”

She could easily picture how different from the Imperial Palace this place was. Less people also meant less danger for the Imperial Children.

Cassandra turned around and walked back to the War God. He put his hands on her shoulders, feeling her skin was a bit colder than usual.

“Don’t get sick.”

“I won’t.”

Kairen pulled her into his embrace, warming her up instantly. Cassandra laid her head against him, closing her eyes and tenderly holding on to her Prince.

“I wish our child could come into this world safely,” she sighed.

Unknown to her, Kairen frowned. Cassandra rarely opened up about her insecurities like this, but if she was already concerned about their child coming into the world... He held her a bit tighter. He would definitely make sure both of them were all right.

As promised, the Imperial Concubine took Cassandra to walk around the markets accompanied by an army of servants and her children. While Shareen didn’t hide her

boredom, Kairen simply followed Cassandra like a shadow, touching her sometimes as if to reassure her that he was there. The little group observed the many stalls with interest and, to Cassandra's surprise, the townspeople didn't seem alarmed to see the Imperial Concubine wandering among them.

They kneeled as they were supposed to in front of the Imperial Family members, but it was obvious that they were used to dealing with Concubine Kareen. She was familiar with some of the merchants too, and many people personally greeted her when they saw her. She was very respected around here.

Cassandra was starting to grow fond of her and her unique character too. She could easily see how Kairen and Shareen had grown into the personalities they had, so different from those of their siblings. Their mother was very cynical, down-to-earth, and forthright.

Cassandra also appreciated that she spoke to her as if they were equals, showing great interest in her knowledge about plants and spices.

"For the skin?" she said doubtfully, as Cassandra was showing her some yellow spice.

"Yes. Turmeric is good for cooking, but it also helps with skin inflammation and redness, and you can drink it as tea."

"Interesting. Let's buy some, I want to try it. I'm old enough to start showing some wrinkles soon."

She was far from looking old though. Concubine Kareen was one of the most beautiful women Cassandra had ever seen, even among the court ladies. She had a cold, natural beauty, with unique traits. Her hair was colored with that enigmatic deep red color, without an ounce of white to be seen.

They walked up to the next stall where some jewelry was laid out. The merchant immediately started showing his goods to the Concubines, but neither of them were really interested.

Suddenly, a ruckus started behind them. Cassandra, afraid, turned around but the commotion was over in an instant. She heard a snap followed by a man being pinned to the ground, Kairen's foot on his back and Shareen's whip around his throat.

Not impressed at all, Kareen turned around and looked at the man. The knife he had held in his hand had fallen at her feet. She picked it up, observed it, then swung it around.

“Who sent you?”

The man stayed silent. The Imperial Concubine exchanged a glance with her daughter and Shareen smirked before tightening the whip. The man’s face started turning blue as he began to suffocate.

“Talk. I won’t have any guilt killing you slowly and very painfully, and whoever paid you knew that.”

“I...I don’t...”

Kareen sighed as the man struggled to talk.

“I...don’t...kn...know...”

“How useless. Who was your target, then?”

The man tried to stay silent once more, struggling to breathe, but his eyes betrayed him. In a split second, he had glanced at Cassandra, but immediately avoided her returning stare.

She stepped back, shocked. She had only been there for a couple of hours! How could an assassin already have come to kill her?

“What shall we do with him, Mother?” asked Shareen.

“Whatever you want. Let’s go back before another one comes out though.”

Kareen turned back towards the Palace and started walking. Cassandra, still in shock, had her eyes riveted on the man. However, Kareen stepped between them, gently pushing her to follow in his mother’s tracks. After a few steps, she heard a whip slashing through the air and people screaming. Kareen kept her from looking back though, blocking her view and holding her by her waist so that they continued forward.

Back at the Castle, it was as if nothing had happened, but Cassandra couldn’t stop worrying.

“How do they already know?” she asked. “Why would they attack so soon?”

“Those people have rats everywhere, especially where their rivals are concerned. They know this is my city and since I took the egg, they knew Kareen would come, and you with him.”

Cassandra felt a chill run through her. To think people were already hunting her down... hunting her unborn child! She knew the rivalry between the Imperial Family was terrible, but experiencing it firsthand was something else.

In fact, the reason the Emperor had so many more daughters than sons was because the boys were hunted from birth. The six Princes that were alive today had all been through a lot to make it to adulthood, as had their mothers. The Emperor had many concubines, but no Empress, so in the race to the Golden Throne, all six brothers were almost equal. However, having heirs definitely gave them an advantage.

And she was carrying one of the Emperor's grandsons. It wouldn't just be during her pregnancy, Cassandra would be targeted for the rest of her life for being a Prince's Concubine. No wonder it was such a dangerous position.

She had been replaying these thoughts in her head until they had got back to the Diamond Castle and Kareen insisted on her taking a nap.

"Just go and rest in my son's room. A mother-to-be shouldn't experience too many emotions in a day, and with this afternoon's fight, you must be tired. I'll have a bath drawn for you before dinner."

Cassandra silently nodded, and Kairen escorted her back to his room.

She sat on his bed, still frowning, worried and confused. To her surprise, her Prince kneeled down in front of her.

"My Lord, don't kneel!"

"We're alone," he said, ignoring her plea. "Tell me what's wrong."

Cassandra only hesitated a second before giving in.

"That man... He wanted to hurt our baby."

"Yes."

"How many more will come to try and hurt him?"

"Aren't you afraid for yourself?"

She shook her head, putting a hand on her belly.

“I’ve never been scared for myself. Before today, I... No, before meeting you, I was never afraid of death. But, now that I’m carrying this child, everything is so different. I’m really afraid something bad will happen to your son.”

The Prince sighed and wrapped his arms around her waist. With her thin build, he easily trapped her in his embrace, yet he was nothing but gentle with her.

“I’ll protect you... and our son. Mother will, too.”

Cassandra smiled gently at him, but it was a smile that held some pain in it too. She caressed his cheek, her heart feeling a bit lighter, just from the feeling of his skin under her finger tips.

“I know...but...this is a cruel world. I’m afraid that this baby will suffer. I just wish he could be born safely, grow up healthy and without worry.”

Cassandra shook her head. This was really too hard. Now, it wasn’t only her own safety at stake, but that of her baby as well. Even if she was having a hard time accepting it, she was pregnant with her Prince’s child. A potential future heir to the whole Empire, yet he was still nothing but a defenseless baby right now.

Kairen suddenly stood up and reached for her, enveloping her in his arms without warning. Cassandra was taken by surprise by his big hands holding her, but she was used to it and let herself go, allowing him to comfort her. When she could finally retreat a bit, she observed him, blushing a bit from being so close.

“I’ll protect you,” he assured her again. “Cassandra. You’re mine... and this child is ours. I won’t let anything happen to our son. Do you think I would let anything happen to you?”

She realized he was expecting a response, asking how much she trusted him at that moment. Somehow, it made her feel better and she finally relaxed a bit.

“No. I know you will protect our baby.”

“I’ll protect both of you...forever. I only need you. And our child. And any other children you’ll give me.”

Cassandra blushed uncontrollably. Not just this one, but her Prince wanted more children with her! She nodded with a smile. She did trust him. Trusted the War God, the one man who had protected her all this time.

She leaned in to kiss him, a long, sweet and sensual kiss. Of course he responded, caressing her. Slowly, Kairen pushed her on the bed, holding her tightly and grazing every inch of her body. Each of his moves were so gentle, yet passionate. She felt her body getting warmer.

“Stay here,” he whispered.

“What?”

“Stay here. At the Diamond Palace with my mother and Shareen. They’ll protect you, too.”

“You think I’ll be safer here?”

He shook his head, still holding her and caressing her hips.

“Just...for now. I will come back for you in a few days. I need to see my father.”

“Why?”

Kairen shook his head. Whatever he wanted to tell his father, he wasn’t ready to tell Cassandra yet. She wondered what it was, but didn’t dare pry. She only nodded, closing her eyes and resting her head on his shoulder, where she could feel his warmth and inhale his scent. Cassandra felt much better now that they had talked and she never felt as comfortable and secure as when she was in the Prince’s arms. Kairen, gently pulling his fingers through her hair, helped her fall asleep, but the Prince wasn’t ready for a nap himself. He kept his eyes open, dark as shadows, thinking of what to do next.

When she woke up a couple hours later, Cassandra was surprised to find Kairen gone. The Prince had left during her rest, according to the servant who woke her up.

His mother, however, was waiting for her at dinner with Shareen. Both women seemed aware that Kairen was gone, making Cassandra feel a bit better about it, though she wished he had said goodbye before going.

“You will stay here for now,” announced Kareen, as the three women finished eating. “As discussed, I will keep you safe and make sure your child grows healthily. Outside threats won’t get into this Palace.”

“Excuse me, Concubine Mother, but...how are you so sure? This man, back at the market, he attacked us so easily.”

“The market is the market. This Palace is my domain. No one comes in or out without my permission, and I have the highest security.”

Just as Cassandra was about to ask a question, a large shadow suddenly appeared above them. She almost jumped, taken by surprise. It wasn't Krai. The dragon stared at them from above the stone wall looking grumpy. This dragon was much smaller, about the size of three large dogs, dark purple, and with yellow eyes like a cat. Cassandra felt strange. How did the Concubine Mother have a dragon?

“This is Srai. He is the guardian of this Palace...and an avid eater of intruders.”

As she said that, the dragon softly growled and Shareen smirked.

“I wondered if he was still stuck to you, Mother. He is so tiny, but he makes a good watchdog, I guess.”

Her mother responded with a glare.

“You too, Shareen. You will stay here and make sure Cassandra stays safe.”

“Me? I am not a concubine's bodyguard!”

“Unless I say so,” warned her mother. “Do you want to upset me, Daughter?”

The two exchanged glares for several long, unsettling seconds. Cassandra felt badly, caught between the two of them, but didn't dare to say a word before one of them.

“Ugh... Fine!” Shareen finally conceded.