

The War God's Favorite by Jhonny Fox

Chapter 11

#11 The Shadelands

Excited, the Black Dragon scampered their way, lowering its gigantic head to their level and keeping its red eyes on them. Cassandra had almost forgotten that it was allowed to wander around freely. No one wanted to mess with the dragon and Kairen didn't need to restrain it either.

Despite its impressive size and the limited space in the courtyard, the dragon once again tried to reach out to Cassandra, growling softly in her direction. She still couldn't understand what it wanted, but she was happy to see it so interested in her. (1)

"Get on."

Surprised, Cassandra turned to Kairen. How was she supposed to mount the dragon? Those scales looked way too sharp and uneven! Krai was waiting and watching with big, red, curious eyes. Was it really alright for her to mount it? An Imperial dragon! Most people would feel blessed just getting a chance to see them once in their life, let alone touch one. And not only had she been able to touch it, but the Prince also wanted her to ride it!

"So slow," grumbled Kairen.

Without warning, he suddenly lifted Cassandra up onto his shoulder, making her squeal in surprise.

"My Lord!"

Despite her protests, Kairen climbed on to his dragon in only a few movements, keeping Cassandra over his shoulder until he was securely seated. When he finally put her down, she was sitting right in front of him, close to his warm torso. They were so far from the ground and the dragon hadn't even taken off yet! Cassandra felt a bit scared by the height and held on tightly, gripping his fur cloak in her hands. Kairen clicked his tongue and, beneath them, Krai let out a long, loud growl.

"Let's go," he said, grabbing the dragon's collar.

As soon as the words left his lips, Krai extended his wings. The dragon flapped them a couple of times, as if to stretch, and then took off. Cassandra, surprised by the sudden movements, grabbed Kairen even tighter as she repressed a scream. This was really too scary! (2)

The Prince wrapped his arm around her waist and held her firmly as Krai ascended. She stayed like that for a while, hidden against his chest, holding on as tightly as she possibly could. And while she was too scared to look, she could still feel the huge dragon's movements.

"Cassandra."

She moved just a little so she could look at the Prince's face, as he pointed his chin to the side.

"Look."

Trying to forget her fear, she gathered up the courage to look. They were so high already! Kairen pointed down towards the ground. Cassandra was seeing the Capital like she had never seen it before from the skies. She could recognize the main streets, the large Market Place, and the biggest buildings. It was like seeing a huge, detailed map of the City she had always known, as it came alive right under her eyes.

Despite her fear, she couldn't stop looking. She recognized so many things, despite the distance!

"Oh..."

"What?"

"That is the residence of my former master."

Kairen looked down, where Cassandra had her eyes set on a large manor, and his eyes became even darker.

"...We can burn it down." (14)

"What? No, no!" exclaimed Cassandra.

He couldn't possibly burn a whole building down like that! Kairen was visibly angry and frowned while still glaring at the Manor.

"My Lord, you can't just set it on fire! What if the fire expands? There are innocent people down there, too."

She thought about the other slaves that were probably still working there, far from her new situation. While he still seemed unhappy, Kairen finally turned his head, the Manor leaving his sight. Cassandra couldn't help but roll her eyes. Her master was really too blunt and reckless at times.

Once that was more or less resolved, Cassandra finally felt better about the ride. Kairen was holding her firmly and Krai had stopped rising and was now keeping a steady altitude. He was very fast though, as she soon lost sight of the Capital. They were headed north-east, further than she had ever been in her entire life.

The flight took them away from the cities and through vast, uninhabited lands. It was a breathtaking sight. From where they were, Cassandra could see the range of mountains in the north and the Eastern Sea. But the farther they went, the more she wondered what her Prince's lands were like... All the Emperor's children had many assets they were endowed with at birth. As one of the potential heirs to the Golden Throne, Kairen probably had plenty of riches too. She remembered he also had an army. Would there be a military camp?

"Cassandra."

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Not even realizing she had fallen asleep, Cassandra slowly woke upon hearing her name. The sudden sensation of the descent surprised her so she was now wide awake. Krai was heading down, aiming towards a very large, dark castle. The landscape had changed a lot too since the City. She could no longer see vast plains, but rather a large dry area with a few nearby buildings. It was a much darker atmosphere here than the Capital, and more solemn too.

"Are those... the Shadelands?" she asked.

Kairen slowly nodded.

The Shadelands were infamous, like an old legend among the people. Long ago, those territories had been the grounds for terrible wars between the clans. The fights had lasted so long and burned so much of the vegetation, that it was said nothing could grow there anymore. The soil was burned too deeply to even attempt planting anything. Among the desolation there was erected a tall, isolated Castle.

Krai landed slowly in the inner court with a loud growl. Cassandra wondered if the trip had been too long or if it was just happy to be home. Kairen helped her down and as soon as her feet hit the ground, she was suddenly aware of the numbness in her back. Dragon riding was more physical than she had thought... She kept the fur cloak wrapped around her as it was definitely much colder here than in the Capital.

As the Prince dismounted too, she suddenly noticed people walking towards them.

"Welcome back, my Lord!"

An old woman and a middle-aged man, both well dressed, bowed in front of Kairen. He practically ignored them as he walked up to Krai's head.

“GO.”

Instead of going, Krai growled softly and turned to Cassandra, pushing her with its snout. She could feel the dragon’s hot breath, as it kept playfully pushing her around, its big tail swaying dangerously.

The two people who had come were looking at the scene, completely at a loss. Kairen growled a bit.

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“Krai.”

The dragon feigned deafness, and continued giving little head-bumps to Cassandra’s side. She had no idea if she was supposed to go along with the dragon or ignore it, but it was hard to ignore the mountain of scales that kept nudging her. The Prince glared at the big beast who was intent on playing with Cassandra.

“My Lord, what do you want us to do with, uh...” asked the man, a bit hesitant.

Kairen clicked his tongue, visibly irritated, but turned around. 3

“Nevermind.”

He walked inside the Castle, leaving Cassandra alone with Krai. The middle aged man, who was so short and broad he was almost a square, followed him on his stubby legs, giving one last glance to Cassandra

She was left with the large dragon and the old woman, who didn’t look amicable at all. The old lady had grey hair and wore a simple, well-maintained dress and a stubborn look on her face.

“Slave, where did the Master get you?”

Cassandra had almost forgotten about her collar. With the fur cloak around her, the lady couldn’t see her dress color. She wondered if she should let her know she was also a concubine even though she was obviously still a slave too?

“At the Palace, madam.”

“Tsk. Come work in the kitchens once you’re done entertaining the Master’s dragon!”

“Y...yes.”

Cassandra wasn’t sure. Was she supposed to work? Kairen hadn’t mentioned anything before bringing her to the Castle, but she couldn’t possibly laze around and do nothing either.

As soon as the old woman was gone, Krai suddenly rubbed its head against her, lowly growling with its big eyes on her. Cassandra chuckled. Why was this dragon more cat-like than ferocious with her? She gently caressed its black scales. They were indeed incredibly sharp, but they were also smooth, like glass. She could easily cut herself if she didn't pay attention. Some parts were more tender, like snake skin, especially under his maw. Cassandra noticed that Krai seemed to like it a lot when she scratched that spot, hence she kept attending to it, making the dragon growl softly.

"Oh! Em... Ehm... Excuse me..."

A young girl had come into the inner courtyard, pulling a large cart. She froze upon seeing the Black Dragon and Cassandra, obviously impressed, but also rightfully frightened. She looked very young, around thirteen or fourteen, and didn't dare to move.

"I... I have to..."

She was so stressed by Krai's presence, she kept stuttering, unable to take her eyes off the dragon. But the Black Dragon didn't care at all, its head not leaving Cassandra's side.

"Do you need to walk through?" asked Cassandra gently.

The girl nodded frantically.

"Alright... Wait a second."

Cassandra turned around, catching Krai's attention. She walked a little ways away and the dragon immediately followed her, leaving the middle of the inner court empty for the young servant to pass through.

"Ah! Thank you."

While still sending worried glances towards the dragon, the young girl took a wide path to cross the inner court to her destination, pulling her cart quickly. Cassandra made sure to keep distracting Krai until she was gone.

She sighed when they were alone.

"You do look scary," she whispered to the dragon.

Krai growled a bit and spread its wings, suddenly turning its head in another direction. Had it smelled something? The dragon was watching something beyond the wall, only its height enabling it to see so far away. Cassandra wondered if it usually fed itself as it was obviously distracted by something more interesting.

Headed in the direction it was looking, the dragon suddenly took off towards the source of its focus. Cassandra guessed that it was probably hunting time.

"Slave! Are you done tending to the Master's dragon yet?"

The old woman had returned and stalked up to her. (2

"I am the head of the servants here, Patrina. You will call me Madam, understand?"

"Y...yes, Madam."

"Good. What can you do?"

"Hem... Cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, field work, knitting and writing..."

Patrina frowned.

"Writing? You know how to read and write?"

"Yes, Madam."

It was very unusual for a slave, but that's because most slaves were born into slavery and did not have access to any kind of schooling. Cassandra, however, had been taught as a child and practiced secretly by herself. The skill, unique for a slave, had added a bit to her value in front of her previous masters...

"Interesting. Anyway, come with me. Now that the Master is back, we need extra hands in the kitchen. Why do you have this fur cloak? You need to change. Come."