

## Chapter 2

Cassandra slowly opened her eyes.

Where was she? It took her a few seconds to recognize the room and remember the prior events. The Prince's chambers! It was still dark though. What happened at the banquet? She could only remember up to the point where the dragon was going wild.

She realized she was laying in a real bed and feeling... warm. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt so content or slept in real sheets.

However, she couldn't move an inch. Something hot was pressed against her body and Cassandra gasped - it was a man's arm! Moreover, she recognized the scaled braces! She froze, almost unable to breathe. She wasn't just in the Prince's bed, he was in it too!

"...How are you feeling?" the deep voice next to her ear surprised her.

How did he even know she had woken up? He was holding her from behind, his strong body right against her skin. As Cassandra attempted to move she realized someone had bandaged her injured wrist and it smelled of herbal medicine, too.

"My Lord, what happened?" she inquired in a whisper.

"You collapsed at the banquet."

She tried to remember, but the void seemed to confirm what he was saying. It wasn't that surprising. She hadn't eaten in two days, and she wasn't in great condition to begin with, and then to have had so many emotions in one day. It was a lot to deal with.

"You didn't answer."

"I'm better, my Lord," she replied right away, afraid he might become angry.

"...I see."

He stayed silent after that and Cassandra wondered if he had gone back to sleep; she definitely couldn't! This situation was just unbelievable.

She should have died as a nameless slave mere hours ago. So why was it that now she was comfortably laying in a Prince's bed, sheltered from the cold and the whip? She even had brand new clothes, something a slave couldn't ever dream about in a hundred years! What kind of Prince showed interest in a slave, and acted as no one else would? Was it only because of his dragon's interest in her?

What would happen next? She was perfectly aware of her impossible situation. Someone would kill her sooner or later for overstepping her place. The Third Prince Kairen was indeed a stubborn and strong man, but he wouldn't care for her forever.

Presuming her death sentence had only been delayed, Cassandra shivered. Was this what it was like experiencing heaven before you die?

She slowly tried to wiggle away, to leave the bed before something happened. She should definitely not be here. For a slave like herself, even the floor of this bedroom was too good. She had to leave, to sleep in the kitchens or anywhere else, but definitely not in her new master's bed!

“Where are you going?”

Kairen had sensed her moving and held on to her even tighter. Cassandra shook her head, trying to free herself.

“I cannot be here, my Lord, I...”

“Enough.”

He suddenly pushed her down into the mattress and positioned himself over her, looking down with angry, obsidian eyes.

“Why is it that you're constantly trying to run away from me?”

Cassandra stared at him blankly, completely taken by surprise by the same question again and their sudden change of position. Having him linger over her was way too intimidating. And why did he always have to be half-naked? She tried to ignore it, to remember his question.

“I'm not trying to run away...”

“Are you not trying to leave right now?”

“I shouldn't be here! This is your bedroom, a slave is not supposed to be here. If someone sees me...”

“Who?”

His cold and imposing voice suddenly scared her, as if she was brutally reminded of who she was arguing with. It was hard to ignore his black eyes on her, but she tried to look away anyway, intimidated.

“I don’t know,” stuttered Cassandra. “The guards, the Imperial Servants...”

“Do you see anyone but us here right now?”

Strangely, they were indeed all alone. The Imperial Family members usually had a lot of attendants. They had people to take care of their meals, to take care of their clothes, people for everything they would need. Their servants even had higher statuses than common people, and certainly far higher than slaves.

Only Kairen didn’t seem to have any attendants. Since she had been around him, Cassandra had seen absolutely no one but the Imperial Palace attendants. Unlike his other siblings, who were never alone, the Third Prince was never followed by anyone but her now...

“...They will know,” she murmured, afraid.

She was sure, even though there was no one there to witness, people would talk about the shameless slave following her master to his chambers. Too many people had already seen them. Kairen clicked his tongue, annoyed.

“And? So what if they know?”

Cassandra was helpless. Why did she have to explain everything? This man was either way too confident or way too unaware of the world they lived in! Gathering some courage, she answered him truthfully, her emerald eyes still relaying her fear.

“I might get killed, or worse...”

“Worse?” he repeated with a frown.

“Beaten, tortured... Raped...”

Kairen’s expression grew darker with each possible outcome she mentioned, so she stopped, biting her lip nervously. Cassandra was still unable to figure out how he thought. He always seemed either indifferent or angry.

Right now, he was pinning her onto the bed, holding her wrists, exposing her and looking at her like no one else ever had, it was too overwhelming. His eyes were sweeping down her body, ignoring the dress, but taking in the numerous scars it left exposed. His expression grew even darker.

“Who did this?”

“My...previous masters...”

Why was he interested in her scars all of a sudden? She had gotten so many over the years; the worst were the freshest ones. Lyria was horrible to people she didn't like and never spared her efforts in punishing her slaves. The dramatic, red lines still ran over Cassandra's limbs, threatening to tear open again at any moment. She could still vividly remember the feeling of the lashes of the whip where it had cut the deepest.

She had experienced way too much pain to not be scared of punishments again. It was much more terrifying than death...

“...What is your name?”

His question caught her off guard. Why would he be interested in her name? Most masters didn't even care enough to know if she had one! She was only called “you” or “slave” in her past years of servitude. Blushing a bit, she spoke it, that name she hadn't uttered in years.

“...Cassandra.”

“Cassandra. Look at me.”

It wasn't an order she could disobey. Gathering her courage, she looked up at his two obsidian eyes, like two voids she might get lost in.

“From now on, you are mine. If someone touches you, I'll kill them.”

His expression was so serious she didn't know how to respond. Was that a promise? Or a threat?

But somehow, something in her heart mended from hearing those words. Could she trust this man? He was twice as scary as anyone else, yet she felt something indescribable when looking at him. Something that felt like... safety. She hesitated for a moment, then slowly nodded, still looking at him.

“Say it,” he ordered, his eyes dark.

“I’m... Yours,” she whispered.

His expression changed slightly, his mouth opening with heavy breaths. She could feel the arousal build on his dark skin.

“Say it again,” he ordered, his voice getting deeper.

“I’m yours...”

The last word got buried under Kairen’s lips connecting with hers.

Completely unnerved, Cassandra felt his rough kiss before she could even react. What was going on? The Prince’s hot mouth on hers was forceful, unpredictable, and ruthless. She tried to breathe as his tongue entangled with hers. She could feel his body pressing on her, overpowering her effortlessly.

When he finally retreated from her lips and descended to her breasts, she caught her breath.

“Ma... Master...”

She was entirely unable to think straight. His large, warm hands on her skin were exploring and invading everything. Like a wave, his strength was crashing over her, holding her under him while she was subjected to his caresses.

Cassandra had never experienced anything like this before. Her seventeen years of inexperience were cruelly showing, as she had no clue how to respond. Kairen was in total control of her body, his hands firmly holding her. All of a sudden, he tore her dress, exposing her bare chest to his gaze.

“My Lord! The dress...”

They had just borrowed it, too! Cassandra was mortified, thinking about what she had to do in order to get this dress and how it was now torn to shreds... But Kairen obviously didn’t care. Without warning, he sucked on one of her nipples, and she couldn’t hold back a surprised moan. She felt her body reacting, her stomach tingling with an odd sensation. Unable to think straight, she reached out for him, running her hands through his black hair, shivering under his tongue’s movements. He had grabbed her other breast now, playing with both at the same time.

“Hmm... My Lord...”

Cassandra couldn't hold back her moans as much as she tried. The hotness of his mouth on her pink extremities was unbearable. Though she didn't look, she could feel his tongue and his teeth grazing and sucking, biting softly. Moreover, he was pressing his entire body against her, and Cassandra could feel his hips compelling her legs to open into a new, awkward position for her. She could feel everything; the rustling of the sheets, their clothing, his mouth on her skin, and her own embarrassing voice, echoing in the room.

Without warning, Kairen put his hand between her legs.

“Ah! N...No...”

He frowned, his dark eyes on her made Cassandra blush. His hands weren't stopping, but his gaze was fixated on her, making her crazy with embarrassment.

“No?” he repeated.

She blushed and bit her lip. Was she really so unable to control her own body? How embarrassing! She was breathing and moaning louder as Kairen continued caressing her. His fingers found their way to her slit, stroking it until they slid through to rub her entrance. Cassandra gasped, a seductive sensation spreading through her whole body. His movements were fast and insistent, going in and out, rubbing and pressing further into her.

Her legs were trembling, and she was struggling to breathe correctly. The fire raging inside was driving her crazy, and she wanted more. Without realizing, Cassandra had grabbed her master's shoulder with her free hand to brace herself.

“Hm... Ma... Oh! Mas...Master... hn...”

“What is it?”

Kairen's eyes were focused on her, considering each of her reactions to his touch. Occasionally, he leaned down to suck and lick her breasts again, but more than that, he was hypnotized by her cries and moans. Playing with her pussy, he was moving his fingers into her, subjecting her to new pleasures. He felt her juices moisten his hand, while his own body was already reacting to her.

She was his. He had thought this the minute his dragon had put her at his feet - when he had seen her from up close. He wanted this woman, no matter who she was. He wanted all of her.

“Say it again.”

“Hm... Wh...What?”

His fingers slowed down their movements, giving her a minute of respite so she could understand and answer.

Catching her breath, Cassandra looked at him, his face so close she could see every small detail. This man was her new master. An odd, unforgiving, and ruthless Prince. A Dragon Lord and War God.

“I’m... I’m yours...” she whispered to him, with a breathy voice.

“Again.”

His hands undid his buckle to remove his pants, and she heard the clothes falling to the floor. She trembled, a bit unsure and scared.

“I’m yours,” she repeated the words, to also reassure herself.

“Again.”

She repeated them again and again, while he positioned himself between her spread legs. As the blood rushed to her cheeks and ears, she felt his member against her entrance, and kept repeating those words, like a prayer.

“I’m yours, I’m yours... I’m... Ah!”

Cassandra whimpered in pain, feeling his cock pushing in. Kairen stopped, his hot breath against her ear.

“Breathe,” he said to her soothingly.

She tried, wondering if it was supposed to be this painful. Once he thought she was getting used to it, the Prince pushed further in and she cried out again. His movements were slow, but she was so unused to the sensation, and he was also large. She tried to breathe, listening to his voice as he was groaning.

“You’re... tight...”

She held onto him tighter, pulling him in a little and catching his eyes.

“Slower,” she simply said.

Her voice came out clear like a demand, the first one she had formulated in years. Almost an order, at this unexpected time. Kairen, a bit surprised, obeyed without thinking. Gaging her reactions, he went at a slower pace, his back and forth matching Cassandra's labored breathing.

She tried to get more comfortable with his hard member inside her, focusing on the better sensations and pushing the pain away. She was used to pain, she could handle it. But behind it now, something much more pleasurable was waiting, and she wanted to reach it. Kairen moved inside her, and she found herself slowly gyrating her hips to follow his rhythm, trying to share the control of their movements.

Cassandra felt him accelerate, his cock rubbing faster inside her, stirring her up. She wasn't even trying to hold her voice back anymore. She was flooded with too many sensations to concern herself with that.

"A...Aaah! Hm...Hm, hm..."

Her cries melded with Kairen's groans. It was painful, but it was good too. And she could tell he was not stopping anyway. The War God was on her, inside her, unleashing himself and moving wildly. Cassandra's moans grew louder as he went faster, holding her under him, his cock pounding...

With a final thrust, he stopped deep inside her, groaning hard. Something warm filled her insides and she moaned again, the sensation driving her crazy.

She trembled as she slowly regained her senses. She felt his lips press against hers and answered the kiss without thinking, too tired to consider anything else.

When she woke up the next morning, Cassandra's whole body felt completely sore. Blushing at the memory of the intense sex with her master, she pulled the bedsheet over her naked body.

But, looking around, she realized that she was alone in the large bedroom. Did her master leave early? She got up, keeping the bed sheet around her. The Prince had torn her only dress, so she felt a bit helpless, naked, and alone in the Prince's room, with no clue what to do. She didn't even know how late in the day it was.

Suddenly, there was a little knock at the door. As a servant entered, Cassandra recognized the young woman as one of Princess Shareen's, the one who had advised her the previous day.

She was carrying a little parcel which she promptly unwrapped before Cassandra.



“Good Morning. His Highness requested a new dress for you.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Cassandra.

It was a new, dark red one this time. Cassandra frowned upon seeing the color. Didn't servants in the Palace commonly wear green?

“That color...”

“It is the color worn by low-ranking concubines. You'll be wearing this from now on”

Cassandra blushed. So they would all now be aware that she had slept with the Third Prince! It seemed unreal that this information was already known as soon as the very next morning. Were they seen? Or was it because she had slept in the Prince's bedroom all night?

“But this...”

She raised a hand to the slavery collar still hanging around her neck. Could a slave really be a concubine? She didn't think it was possible! The young servant girl gently smiled at her and shook her head.

“Do not worry, it's not like there hasn't been any precedents set for Princes and Emperors taking slaves as concubines. Your life will most likely get a bit easier if you wear this, even if you are still a slave. But you cannot be treated the same as high-ranking concubines or taken as the official wife.”

Cassandra nodded. Even to be taken as a low-ranking concubine was too much for her, she couldn't imagine anything more! She looked at the dress again, wondering if her master had known this would happen.

“What is your name?” she asked the young servant.

“Dahlia.”

“Thank you for the dress, Dahlia...”

The young woman bowed with a smile and swiftly left the room, leaving Cassandra feeling odd. It was the first time someone had ever bowed to her.

Still a bit hesitant about what to do next, she started by washing herself at the little water basin. She thought of last night again, making her blush once more. The Prince had been so... fierce! She hadn't expected that having sex required so much stamina.

She had some mild bruising on her arms where he had held her a bit too tightly. Thankfully her wrist wasn't as painful as before, so she didn't have any trouble putting the dress on - the deep red dress... Cassandra didn't know much about the Imperial Palace's protocols, but she recalled seeing the concubines in various shades of red and pink. Was pink the color reserved for the high-ranked concubines then?

The Prince suddenly came back into the room, his eyes immediately finding her.

“You're up.”

“Yes, Your Highness...”

He looked over and Cassandra followed his gaze to a little table, where she hadn't noticed a large tray of food. There were fruits, meats, cheeses and wine. The Prince frowned,

“Why haven't you eaten?”

“I hadn't noticed...”

“Aren't you hungry?”

“Yes.”

How could she not be? The last time she ate was more than two days ago! She might have been starving but she was used to the painful sensation of hunger. Upon seeing those delicious looking plates, however, she couldn't repress the hungry growl emitted by her stomach.

“Let's eat then.”

He walked over and sat in a large armchair while Cassandra followed and, like she would have done with her previous masters, knelt on the floor next to him, but Kairen frowned.

“What are you doing?”

He grabbed her arm and pulled her up onto his lap without warning. Cassandra was suddenly straddling his leg, facing him, dangerously close. The swift action brought her attention to his bare chest, causing her to blush!

“Master, I can't!”

But he ignored her and took a slice of meat from the table. His other hand was still firmly holding Cassandra in place, and she had to put her hand on his shoulder to keep herself steady. What kind of embarrassing position was this? She hoped he would let her go, but Kairen just kept eating, ignoring her pleading eyes.

“Eat. We have a long journey ahead.”

“A long journey?” she asked, a bit lost.

“Going home. The Festival is over.”

She suddenly realized it was the eighth day! The Festival had ended this morning and the Princes were now free to go back to their respective lands. So he was bringing her back to his castle then? She wondered what kind of place it was.

Kairen brought a grape to her lips and Cassandra had no choice but to take it. She was a bit embarrassed, but was distracted by the amazingly sweet taste! She remembered eating dried or rotted grapes, but never fresh ones. She took her time eating the little fruit while he watched her with a slight grin. She blushed again; it was her first time receiving something close to a smile from him.

She finally reached out her hand to take another grape and started eating with delight. This was so great, to be able to eat without worry. Before, she had to eat quickly and hidden from her masters, so that she wouldn't be beaten for slacking off. And slaves could only eat what servants wouldn't even want, leftovers and rotten food. Once in a while, she would be lucky enough to get some rice or dried fruits, but never fresh fruit, cheese or meat. This was all a first for her!

Kairen was silently watching her eat, one arm on the armchair and his other around her waist. He took some meat from time to time, but he was mostly busy observing each of his new concubine's movements. Cassandra continued eating small bites like a little bird. It was obvious she was avoiding his gaze, blushing and looking down.

As she placed a little cube of cheese in her mouth, Kairen suddenly took her chin between his fingers and pulled her in for a kiss. Playing with her tongue, he stole the little cube, eating it before her stunned eyes.

“M...Master!”

How could he do that?! Cassandra was so surprised by his childish game she hadn't even been able to react. Kairen tilted his head towards the food.

“Give me some meat.”

Grabbing a greasy piece of beef, she handed it to him, wondering why he was suddenly acting lazy. But Kairen just looked at her, ignoring the food. She didn't really understand his strange behavior until...! That's when she understood - he wanted her to do it again. It was so embarrassing!

“Cassandra.”

His forceful tone made her even more uneasy. She knew she couldn't refuse him, and it was just feeding him, right? She took the meat between her lips and approached him. This time, Kairen leaned in, grabbing it from her mouth while kissing her. The meat's juice dripped from their lips while their tongues entangled. Soon enough, the Prince had eaten the little piece but kept their deep kiss going. Not letting go of her, Kairen kept her close, preventing Cassandra from backing away.

Their kiss was so intense she could barely keep up with his lips. The taste of the meat lingered there, something sweet and sour. When he finally relaxed his embrace, Cassandra leaned back to catch her breath, a bit light-headed.

Without anything more, Kairen grabbed a new bite himself this time, eating the meat as if nothing had happened.

Cassandra was completely lost by his sudden change of demeanor. Still, she grabbed more food, hoping he would let her eat in peace this time. Kairen had apparently decided to oblige her unspoken wish as they ate in silence, Cassandra enjoying a bit of each food that was there. Her master was still holding her by the waist, only occasionally caressing her with his thumb, and only asked for food to be delivered by kissing a couple more times. Cassandra complied, but was just as embarrassed as the first time and was relieved when he finally stopped eating before her.

Even with his close presence and the embarrassing position, she found it impossible to ignore the delicious food and ate her fill for the first time in a very long while. Once she was pleasantly full and feeling much better than before, she awkwardly kept her stare on the plate of remaining food, not sure of what to do next.

Kairen leaned in to kiss her neck without warning, pulling her to face him completely.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Yes...” she whispered.

Without adding anything else, Kairen got up and pulled Cassandra to follow behind him. He grabbed two fur coats, handing one to her as they headed outside. Cassandra was a bit surprised; a fur coat again? When Kairen opened the door of his chambers, two Palace servants suddenly rushed over and Cassandra instinctively hid behind him. She still remembered how she had been brutally dragged out the previous day.

“What is it?”

Kairen frowned at her strange behavior but she shook her head, only staying close behind him. The two servants didn't even bother to look at her as they bowed in front of the Prince. Those men weren't the same ones as before, and the Prince was there, but they still made her nervous.

“His Highness the Imperial Dragon sent us to remind Your Highness that your presence is requested in three months for the Spring Festival and he sends his congratulations on your new concubine. Gifts will be sent for the Lady to Your Highness's palace.”

Cassandra was speechless! Were they talking about her? Was the King truly happy his son had taken her for a concubine? And to send gifts too! She couldn't even begin to process what was happening, but Kairen just ignored the men and walked on.

She followed him closely, wondering where they were headed. If he wanted to leave, shouldn't he have headed for the stables? But instead, he was headed to the large gardens of the Imperial Palace, ignoring all the servants who were bowing along the way.

It was only when they finally reached the end of a large, vined garden that Cassandra understood. A mountain of black scales was heading their way with excited eyes. They weren't going by horse or carriage, they were going to fly!

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.

“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!

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.”

“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.”

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 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.

“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.

“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.

“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.”

Cassandra followed the old woman, feeling unsure. Kairen had gone off elsewhere without telling her what she was supposed to do in the Castle.

Walking at a quick pace, Patrina took her to a large kitchen where two other women were working. They both turned their heads when they saw her coming, surprised.

“A new head? And a slave, too?” asked a tall woman with long brown hair.

“His Highness brought her from the Palace,” said Patrina, not stopping.

Cassandra walked right behind her, only glancing briefly at the other women. The tall one didn’t seem to care much about her as she shrugged and went back to her chores. The second one, who was sitting on the side cutting fruit, gave her a gentle smile as their eyes met. She was a redhead with freckles all over her face.

“Come in here.”

Patrina took her to a little room off to the side of the kitchen. It looked like a storage room, with baskets of vegetables and dried meats lined up along one side. Along the other, there were all kinds of fabrics piled up on a shelf; Patrina headed that way.

“It’s a lot hotter in the Capital than it is here, you’ll want to change into something warmer. You...”

She suddenly went quiet. Cassandra had started taking the fur coat off her shoulders. Patrina, surprised, stared at the red dress for a few seconds before regaining her composure.

“You are... the Master’s concubine?”

“Yes,” admitted Cassandra, blushing a bit.

Patrina sighed.

“And a slave... You should have told me sooner! Really, what was the Master thinking? I don’t know if I have anything proper to dress you!”

“Anything is fine!” said Cassandra suddenly. “I really don’t mind the dress.”

“No, no. There are rules. A slave concubine...I don’t even know what I can give you that would be appropriate. Why hasn’t this come off yet?”

She was hinting at Cassandra’s slave collar; but those collars didn’t come off easily. Cassandra shook her head, feeling a bit helpless.

“His Highness doesn’t have my slave contract...”

Patrina sighed.

“I see. It can’t be helped then. Oh whatever, I guess we’ll have to work with it. Let me think... I can’t have you doing any hard labor...”

Cassandra felt really odd about the whole situation. Slaves were usually made to do the worst and hardest jobs but, because of her dual status as the Prince’s concubine, she couldn’t do anything that might injure herself. She also couldn’t do anything that would get her too dirty or be too close to male servants. But doing nothing while other servants around her worked wouldn’t be appropriate either since she was still a slave too. It really was quite complicated!

“Let’s do this. You will work inside the Castle only, and serve His Highness whenever necessary. We will find where you can help eventually, it’s not like we ever run out of things to do. Let’s see what he decides about your bedroom later. Oh here, try putting this one on.”

Patrina had taken out a long, thick wool tunic. The white, sleeveless frock fit over her red dress, ensuring her concubine attire would still be visible.

“My bedroom?”

“Yes, I can’t have you sleep in the stables and smell like a horse! We have servant rooms too. So, I’ll prepare you one just in case, but His Highness might have you sleep in one of the empty rooms upstairs.”

Cassandra remembered the shape of the Castle from her arrival, like a mountain of towers and grey stone; it did, indeed, seem very large. But despite its size, Cassandra had only seen a handful of workers so far. With all those rooms and so few workers... She suddenly wondered how many concubines Kairen actually had here and felt a little pinch in her heart. Could this be jealousy or sadness at the thought that he might have had other favorites? How silly...

“You’re so skinny, all bones! Put this belt on, too, maybe you’ll look like something. There we go.”

Indeed, the thin leather belt added some structure to her ensemble, showing off her thin waist. Cassandra felt more properly dressed in this, something better suited for the cold weather. She quickly did her long braid over and arranged it in a bun so that she could work without it getting in the way.

Patrina nodded, looking satisfied.

“Looks good. I suppose we can always make you other outfits later, if need be.”

Cassandra felt this was more than enough already. She had worn the same overused slave dress for years. Just being able to change into something new and clean felt like a blessing! The silk and wool felt great on her skin, too and warmed her up.

Patrina grabbed a basket of fruits on her way out as Cassandra followed.

“We’ll give you a tour later. For now, the Master just came back, so we have to cook his dinner. You’ll help us.”

“What should I do?”

“You can wash those vegetables first.”

Cassandra nodded as they returned to the kitchen. The two servant women raised their heads upon seeing them.

“Madam, we are running out of... What is that?!”

Completely speechless, the taller woman pointed at Cassandra’s dress, unable to hide her shock. Patrina rolled her eyes and walked over to the large counter.

“That’s how it is.”

“She can’t be a concubine!”

This time around, the woman didn’t hide her anger and disgust. She didn’t even look at Cassandra, only at the red dress, her eyes burning with obvious jealousy. Patrina clicked her tongue and slapped her hand on the table.

“Enough! Nebora, stop shouting and get back to work!”

Cassandra didn’t dare move with that woman still glaring at her. The other servant, who looked a bit younger than Nebora, walked over and took her hand.

“Here, I’ll show you the water system.”

Cassandra was only too happy to ignore Nebora’s seething anger. Ignoring her colleague, the redhead guided her to a large sink and acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

“You just have to roll this over a few times, and the water will flow. Careful though, it’s very cold. We need to make sure to use it several times a day so it doesn’t freeze.”

“Thank you. I think I’ve used this type before.”

“Really? Good then! I was wondering if the Palace’s systems might be more advanced. Anyway, you can just wash these off for now and I’ll cut them. alright?”

Cassandra nodded.

“Thank you very much,” she whispered.

The young woman smiled.

“You’re welcome, we don’t get to see new faces often, so... I’m Marian, by the way.”

“Cassandra.”

“Oh, you have a name? And it’s pretty, too! Alright Cassandra, you can start with those then. Let’s hurry up, Patrina gets grumpy when we are slow.”

Compared to Nebora’s attitude, Marian was more outgoing, she at least smiled at Cassandra, too, which made her feel better. It would be hard if she couldn’t get along with anyone here... The redhead turned out to be quite clumsy. She almost cut herself several times while handling the vegetables, mostly because she kept chatting at the same time. Cassandra felt anxious every time she watched her use the knife. So much so, she was careful to only give her one vegetable at a time and keep an eye on her movements. Patrina too, kept telling Marian to focus, despite being busy herself with baking bread.

As the chores went on, Cassandra was surprised to only see a handful of servants walking around. Why was no one else busy at this time of day? The four women worked until the meal for the Prince was ready, but that was pretty much it.

Patrina put the silver tray into Cassandra’s hands.

“Here. You can take it upstairs to the Prince’s chambers.”

“That’s my job!” Nebora yelled suddenly.

Cassandra was exhausted by the woman’s attitude. Since she had been there, Nebora had continuously shown annoyance towards her. She glared and complained the entire time. What kind of childishness was this?

“Enough, Nebora,” Patrina sighed. “Cassandra will give the Master his meal. She is his concubine and therefore has more rights than you...”

“More rights? She is just a damn slave! Have you seen her collar? She shouldn’t even be touching his food! I am the one who brings meals to His Highness!”

As offended as she felt by the comment, Cassandra was more annoyed by Nebora’s yelling and childish attitude. Even if she was jealous or had something against slaves, her whole charade was too much!

Cassandra pushed the tray of food into Nebora's hands without warning. Surprised, the woman grabbed it just in time for it not to fall.

"Go ahead, take it."

"Cassandra..." started Patrina, but she shook her head.

"She can take it up to His Highness if she wants to so much. I don't want to argue over something so silly."

Cassandra's tempered tone greatly contrasted with Nebora's attitude, making her sound twice as petty, especially now that she actually had the tray in her hands. But that didn't calm her down. Annoyed by Cassandra's display, Nebora threw the tray on the table with a bang. One of the plates fell, shattering loudly and tossing some of the bread on the floor. She started yelling, not even looking at the food.

"Who the hell do you think you are?! You are not to make deci..."

Before she could end the sentence, Cassandra slapped her.

A heavy silence fell over the kitchen as three pairs of eyes looked at her in total shock. Even Patrina had no idea how to react. Nebora put a hand on her burning cheek, trying hard to process what just happened. She was looking at Cassandra as if she was some kind of monster.

"I don't care if you don't have any respect for me," Cassandra stated. "But at the very least, you should learn to have some respect for the food, and the people who spent time preparing it, for His Highness!"

Walking past her shocked colleague, Cassandra crouched down to pick up the bread and put it back on the counter, cutting off the parts that had touched the floor. Nebora looked shaken by her words. Her anger had somewhat disappeared and was replaced by a visible red hue on her cheeks.

"It... It... It's just some bread..."

"It's His Highness' bread," corrected Cassandra. "I have seen people whipped and killed for a lot less than dropping their Master's food."

Once again, she spoke very calmly, while Nebora finally seemed embarrassed by her actions. As she continued picking up the broken pieces of plate, she suddenly cut her finger on one of the shards. Marian hurried to help her pick the rest up. When they



were done, Cassandra handed it all to Marian and picked up the tray again. She headed for the stairs, but stopped in front of Nebora, who was in her way.

“Some people are starving and would do anything to get some bread,” she said to Nebora. “Patrina spent a long time making this, too. So, if you want to bring this to His Highness, you are responsible for it the entire way. Do you want to take it or not?”

Taken aback by her question, Nebora looked at Cassandra and saw that she was asking seriously, without a hint of anger or hatred towards her. That made her feel even worse, and she shook her head while looking down, completely remorseful and embarrassed.

“Alright. Then you can lead the way for me, I don’t know where to go.”

Again, Nebora was rendered speechless. After the scene from earlier, was Cassandra still completely willing to let her come along? Unable to utter a word, she nodded awkwardly and turned around leading the way to the stairs as Cassandra followed behind her with the tray.

Still standing in the kitchen, Patrina and Marian were speechless.

Climbing the stairs in front of her, Nebora didn’t dare raise her head. She could still feel the burn of Cassandra’s slap on her cheek, but the most painful thing was her wounded ego. Now that she had calmed down, she indeed realized that her actions from earlier were too childish.

She stole glances at Cassandra as they went up the stairs, intrigued by the young woman. They were probably around the same age, but Cassandra’s body was marked from her years as a slave. She had scars all over her pale skin. The oldest ones had turned white and faded with time, but Nebora could see there were also more recent ones that were still red and fresh.

That and her skinny body aside though, Cassandra was obviously very pretty. She had gorgeous green eyes and long brown hair, with a reddish tint. Nebora, on the other hand, was quite average; she had brown hair, dark eyes with sun tanned skin, and was too tall. Her only assets were her ample breasts and curvy hips. For a long time, she had hoped these would help her get a husband and a comfortable life as a housewife. However, no one had gotten serious with her and she became bitter as the years passed.

She had thought herself lucky when she was picked to be a servant to the Castle, two years ago, and appointed to deliver the Prince's meals. What woman wouldn't want to be close to a Prince! With every tray she had carried, she had held on to that little hope inside her that maybe, just maybe, the Third Prince would finally see her.

When they finally reached one of the higher floors of the Castle, the walls subtly started to change. Cassandra hadn't noticed before, but the Castle's walls were black, not white or grey like those of the Palace. They emitted a unique smell, too; something acrid and smoky, like charcoal.

As the two women kept climbing, the matte black suddenly turned into a shiny, smooth texture. The area felt colder, too. If her hands weren't busy carrying the tray, Cassandra would have touched it. She could almost see her own reflection in the millions of little facets!

"What is this...?" she asked in a whisper.

"Onyx stones. According to legend, this Castle must always be black, tainted by the ashes of battlefields, the home of the War God... It was built on a sleeping volcano, the previous owners added those black gemstones when they expanded the Castle," explained Nebora.

"The home of the War God...?"

The servant nodded.

"For generations, only the best fighters and generals in the Empire have lived here. It is said the Castle will collapse, or the volcano underneath will burst in anger if the owner is unworthy. It can even stay empty for years if the Imperial Dragon believes no one merits the title. The Castle was gifted to His Highness four years ago after his victory against the Eastern Republic and the Barbarian Tribes. Before that, the Castle had been empty for nearly sixty years."

Sixty years! No wonder it looked so empty and desolate. With no one to live here, most of the rooms they passed through didn't even have the most basic furniture, or if they did, it was old and covered in dust.

Did that also explain why these lands seemed so... uninhabited? Cassandra remembered the vast empty fields they had flown over. She had been surprised by how few villages and houses she had seen. The weather wasn't the best, but it wasn't bad enough to justify the lack of people. Though without a Lord to watch over the

area, and govern and regulate it, no wonder the locals had been forgotten about and left on their own.

“These are the Prince’s apartments.”

The two women stopped in front of a set of large doors. Nebora hesitated a bit, but Cassandra’s hands were obviously busy with carrying the large tray, so she stepped forward to push open the large doors.

It wasn’t what Cassandra had expected at all. It was a vast tower, with a roof so high nobody could reach it. There were only two windows, but each was so large that the light was radiating into the room. This chamber was also the one with the most furniture by far. Quickly taking a look at her surroundings, Cassandra noticed a desk, several chairs, two tables, a chaise covered with Kairen’s fur cloak, a large canopy bed, a couple of bookshelves, and at least three or four chests.

When the women walked in, Kairen was sitting on the bed and raised his head. From his messy hair, Cassandra wondered if he had just been resting until then. Or, was he reading? There were scrolls and documents scattered on the bedside table.

“Where were you?” he asked abruptly.

“In the kitchen, helping, my Lord”

Nebora frowned slightly. Cassandra’s calm tone and slight blush while answering their Master was totally unexpected. She gazed at the Prince, but it was obvious he was only addressing Cassandra and wasn’t sparing her a single glance. Once again, jealousy pinched at her heart and she looked down, angry. Cassandra’s actions earlier had made a strong impression on her and now she was only left with her bitterness.

The Third Prince was an impressive, strong and muscular man. His face was rather handsome as well, but stern with his dark eyes. It was like looking at a tiger - dangerous and beautiful. Despite his coldness, Nebora couldn’t help but find him attractive, but he was not a man she could just approach when she wanted. All those times before, she had brought every tray, every bottle, with the slightest hope he might look at her.... He never did.

Yet, that untouchable man was looking at Cassandra, talking to her and listening to her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Nebora had a hard time understanding why this was happening. The only thought she was left with was that Cassandra was on a whole other level than her.

Stepping forward, Cassandra silently put the tray down on the table closest to Kairen. As she was doing that, the Prince suddenly grabbed her wrist, pulling her to him without even acknowledging the food.

She was brought between his knees, still standing while he was sitting, his face level with her breasts.

“My Lord, your food...”

“Later,” he growled.

Indeed, he didn't even look at it and instead placed his hands on Cassandra's hips, drawing her even closer to him. She gasped in surprise at his sudden movement. She recognized the same glimmer of lust in his eyes as before. As he gazed intensely at her, his hand moved down her leg to the end of her skirt, before sliding back up underneath, caressing her skin. Cassandra trembled. It was still the middle of the day, yet he was already intent on touching her!

His torso was bare, and she had no choice but to put a hand on his shoulder when his hot hand suddenly made her shiver.

“Are you cold?” he asked, in his raspy voice.

“A bit...”

Indeed, the room, being the highest in the Castle, was quite cold. Cassandra's milky skin could barely handle it, but it may have also been the contrast with Kairen's seductive hands that made it even worse. He smirked and suddenly pulled her on the bed and into the folds of a thick fur blanket. With Cassandra lying across the bed, he leaned over her, placing his hands on either side of her head.

She started blushing uncontrollably, with his face so close and the memories of the previous night coming back to her.

“My... My Lord... It's still early...” she stuttered.

Kairen obviously didn't care at all. He started kissing her, licking and biting her lips, while his hands were pulling her skirt up. He kissed lower on her jaw, down from the high part of her neck, but frowned when he met the cold metal of her slavery collar.

“Get this damn thing off,” he growled.

“W...what?”

“Your collar, take it off.”

But Cassandra shook her head.

“My Lord, I can’t.”

“You refuse?”

“No, I really can’t. Look...”

She turned it a little, showing the complex lock that was keeping it closed. There were some very small words and numbers engraved under it...

“These collars can only be taken off by our masters, with a special key... It cannot be simply opened like a clasp.”

Kairen was unhappy upon hearing that. She had to keep the damn thing on? From the looks of it, it couldn’t be forced without injuring her. It was too thick, too large and too close to her throat. Annoyed, he glared at the collar.

Under his arm, Cassandra saw Nebora timidly gesture something at her before leaving and closing the doors behind her. She sighed, feeling a bit less shy now that they were alone. Yet, she couldn’t endure Kairen’s anger about her collar. Was it really so upsetting for the Prince? Did he even realize what taking off that collar would mean for her?

He probably didn’t care... He just wanted it off, simple as that. Had he ever cared that she was a slave, anyway? Cassandra felt her heart warm a little at that thought. This man was truly too hard to understand. He was a part of those who ruled this world, this land, yet he was oblivious of its most basic rules. Slave or not, he didn’t seem to give a damn... And she couldn’t help but like him for that.

Slowly, Cassandra put a hand on his cheek and approached his lips to kiss him softly. The surprised look on Kairen’s face was a first. He finally forgot the collar and looked at her, obviously baffled by her gesture. But it was over in a second as he kissed her back right away. He pushed it further, using his tongue and kissing her deeply and forcefully like he always did. His hands, too, became more pressing as he struggled to lift her skirt up. When he finally reached her undergarments, he swiftly got rid of them.

His fingers on her clit made Cassandra gasp. He immediately started caressing her, his fingers looking for her entrance and enticing her. The sensations unleashed hot waves

inside her and she couldn't hold her moans as Kairen's skillful hand gave her shivers of pleasure. How could she like this so much already? She bit her lip, trying to hold it in as she grabbed the fur around her, but his fingers penetrated her, going in and out, faster and faster, and had her wet and excited immediately. She closed her eyes, too embarrassed to look at him any longer.

She hadn't thought it would make things more intense, but she could now focus only on this devilish rubbing inside her. Cassandra couldn't hold her voice back anymore. Her moaning was echoing in the room and she just couldn't stop it. When his fingers finally stopped and slid out, she could barely catch her breath. Her pussy was still trembling and soaking as the sensation lingered.

Kairen leaned over her again, and she felt him suddenly pushing inside her. She whimpered briefly, as it took a few seconds for her to get used to him, so thick and hard inside her, filling her to her core. Unable to wait, Kairen started moving, thrusting his hot member at a steady pace. His large hands were firmly caging Cassandra in place, submitting her completely to his rhythm. He slid in and out, without slowing down, taking so much pleasure in it already.

She was perfectly hot and wet, yet just tight enough to squeeze him and he loved it. The way she felt and her moaning voice crying out with each thrust, knowing that she was feeling it intensely too, was almost as satisfying as the sensations around his cock. He could thrust fast, hard, and deep, making Cassandra's voice resonate in unison with his own movements.

He straightened and wrapped her legs around his sides, grabbing her hips more firmly as he increased the speed of his thrusts, unable to stop. She was wailing loudly, her eyes closed and her mouth open, her thighs shaking. The bed started creaking under his wild moves and Cassandra suddenly grabbed his shoulder to hold onto, her other hand trying to cover her mouth.

He didn't let go of her, and kept going, showing no sign of slowing down. Cassandra was going crazy, unable to hold her voice or stop her hips from shaking against his. She could tell her pussy was soaking, hearing the carnal sounds of his penetration. Her body was hot, so impossibly hot. She could feel her extremities going numb and her stomach going wild. She began to moan even louder, as she felt her climax coming on. She liked it, she liked it so much she just couldn't believe it.

In a raspy voice, she started begging, unable to control it anymore.

“Yes, yes... Please... Yes...”

She didn't even realize what she was saying as the words continued to flow, feeling her orgasm coming. Suddenly, it exploded inside of her. Her whole body quivered as she felt stars bursting in her head and stomach.

She involuntarily tensed her legs around Kairen's waist, and he slowed down, kissing her without pulling out. His slow rhythm made the sensation linger even longer. Cassandra had a hard time coming back to her senses and catching her breath as he kissed along her jawline.

"Did you come?" he asked in a whisper.

It was a rhetorical question, meant to be a bit of a jest, but she blushed. He chuckled as he kept moving slowly, stirring her up inside again.

"M...Master..."

"I'm not done yet," he whispered.

She bit her lip, helpless. They had been going at it for so long already. When was he going to finish?!

"Cassandra?"

She slowly awoke to the sound of Nebora's voice. The servant was crouching down next to her by the bedside.

"It's past dinner time. Do you want to eat something?"

Cassandra frowned and slowly sat up, holding the bed sheets to cover her naked body. She looked around, the fur cloak was neatly folded and laid at the foot of the bed and several candles were lit, illuminating the room in the pitch black evening. He was gone.

"Is it very late?"

"No, but the night falls early here. His Highness left two hours ago," said Nebora.

"Where to?"

"Probably to see the Army of The East. He usually goes to see his men as soon as he gets here."

Cassandra blushed, she was obviously the reason he hadn't gone right away this time. Nebora cleared her throat, a bit embarrassed for a few seconds. Looking down, her cheeks were already red, and she whispered.

"I...I wanted to apologize. You know, about...earlier. I was a bitch to you. A jealous bitch, and I... realized I... Well, that it was stupid. I'm sorry."

It was obvious she was sincere and embarrassed. Cassandra smiled gently.

"Apology accepted. To be fair, I can't really blame you. I am a slave, and also in a... weird position."

A slave who wore a red dress. Thinking about it, Cassandra was still naked. She looked around for her dress, but it was nowhere to be seen. When she looked under the sheets, Nebora understood and handed her a new, white dress.

"Your dress was... um, soiled, so we took it to clean, sorry. I don't think we have any other red dresses. You can wear that nightgown for now, I guess. It's mine."

"Oh...thanks."

Cassandra felt a bit flustered. How many times had she changed clothes today? She took the nightgown from Nebora. The knee length dress was simple and white, knitted in a thicker fabric than what she was used to, but it was agreeably warm considering the cold here.

"You're welcome. But you should really ask His Highness for more clothes. You can't have only one outfit, it'll be a pain to wash every day."

"I don't know if I'm in a position to..."

Nebora rolled her eyes and got up, speaking before Cassandra finished her sentence.

"You're a concubine. Trust me, even the servants here have around ten outfits to change into. Don't bring up the slave thing, he obviously doesn't give a damn about that. His Highness is very rich, so just ask for it!"

Cassandra nodded as she thought about it. Indeed, she couldn't walk around naked or borrow Nebora's clothes all the time. As she started to braid her messy hair, Nebora took a step back, showing her a little plate full of food.



“Oh, are you hungry? I brought this up just in case. Everyone else already ate, but I figured you might have been too...busy to get a bite. His Highness ate before leaving, but you were still asleep.”

“Thanks...”

Indeed, after all that intense activity, she was hungry. It was still so new to her, to be able to eat without begging or having to hide. Instead, she could enjoy plates full of fresh food, just for her. Cassandra started eating some of the little pieces of cheese and fruit as Nebora joined her, sitting on the floor next to the bed.

“How many servants are there?”

“There’s six of us in the Castle, plus two more for the stables.”

“That’s it?” asked Cassandra, surprised.

From the size of the Castle, she had thought there would be at least a hundred people here! Nebora shrugged.

“Well, you’ve seen how it is. Everything is pretty much empty, and there is only the Prince to take care of, so...”

“What? What about his entourage or other concubines?”

Nebora almost choked on the cube of cheese she was eating, and turned to Cassandra with surprised eyes.

“What are you talking about? You’re the only one!”

Cassandra was speechless. The only one? She had figured a Prince like him would have at least a dozen concubines! Maybe even a wife... After all, wasn’t one of the Princes infamous for having a harem of over two hundred? But, to think a man like the War God actually had none...

“Well, to be honest, it’s not like you’re the first one.”

“What do you mean?”

Nebora smirked.

“The Emperor and two of his brothers have tried offering him concubines before. But His Highness didn’t like them. He killed them. Well, to be precise, he killed three and his dragon killed the others.”

Cassandra stood, completely speechless. He actually dared to kill someone sent by the Emperor himself? What kind of man would do that! Was she just lucky to have survived until now? She wasn’t sent by anyone from the Imperial Family though. Cassandra suddenly remembered Shareen’s words to keep herself alive. Did that mean she actually suspected Kairen could kill her as well? That was really too frightening to think about.

“Don’t worry,” said Nebora. “I don’t think you’re anything like those women, you know. Actually, two of them even tried to kill him.”

“What?”

“Well, some say they went crazy, but a lot of people think they had orders to kill the War God. It’s not like the Imperial Family is a very warm household, you know. Everyone knows some of the Princes are just dying to take the Golden Throne.”

Cassandra had noticed that too, at the banquet and the arena. It was obvious the siblings, Princes and Princesses, didn’t like each other much. Some didn’t even bother to hide their hatred for one another. The rivalry had been just barely contained, probably because of the Emperor’s presence...

“Anyways, all that is quite far from us. If anything happens, it will most likely be at the Capital. Nothing happens around here,” sighed Nebora.

“Would you give me a tour?”

Cassandra’s sudden question seemed to surprise her. She hesitated, eating some grapes while Cassandra grabbed the fur cloak.

“Now?”

“His Highness won’t be back for the night, will he?”

“No, he usually leaves for a few days when he goes to see his men... I’m just saying, it’s pretty boring out here.”

“I just feel like seeing more of the Castle, and I’ve slept too much already.”

She wasn't really lying, but Cassandra's real reason was that she actually felt pretty uncomfortable and alone in the gigantic bed. Nebora sitting on the floor next to her made her feel a bit awkward, too.

Standing up, she noticed how cold this room actually was, and wrapped the fur cloak around her shoulders. Nebora, too, was wearing a large wool shawl that went all the way down to her thighs. She stood up at the same time as Cassandra, but frowned, and pointed at her chest that wasn't covered.

"You may want to hide that a bit."

Cassandra looked down, wondering if the cleavage of the dress may have been too much. Her dress wasn't the problem though. Instead, she noticed a dozen deep, red marks scattered on her neck and between her breasts. She blushed deeply and covered them instantly. They were obviously hickeys! How could the Prince have left so many without her even noticing? It was too embarrassing!

Nebora chuckled at her.

"Well, at least it seems His Highness had a good time..."

"Stop it!" exclaimed Cassandra, embarrassed to death. "Can we just go, please?"

Nebora took a second to stop laughing, and grabbed a few more cheese cubes and grapes for them to nibble along the way.

"Alright, alright, let's go."

The two women left the bedroom, each carrying a candle to light the way. It was a very quiet and cold night. Cassandra thought this Castle would have been a bit frightening to explore by herself.

As Nebora had said, despite its size, most of the Onyx Castle was empty and desolate. A few rooms had old furniture covered in dust, but most were completely empty. There were also some that the two women found locked and couldn't open. In total, they walked down six floors to get to the main one. The different floors were separated by quite a lot of height, too. The rooms were so scattered and far apart, that when they finally returned to the kitchen a couple of hours later, they had only managed to see half of the Castle.

“His Highness only uses the top floor, and sometimes, the one below is used for guests, but that’s not very common. Aside from that, everyone lives on the first floor. We only really see him for meal times, and when he comes and goes.”

Nebora went to grab cups to make some hot tea to warm themselves.

“How long have you lived here?”

“I moved to the village near the Castle when I was fourteen. I grew up in the countryside, but I hated field work. There wasn’t anything else to do, so one of my brothers and I eventually left to find work elsewhere. Patrina recruited me around the same time as my brother got into His Highness’ army.”

“I’ve heard a lot about the Army of The East.”

Nebora smiled.

“Of course, they are the best army in the Empire; thanks to the War God. They became notorious after defeating the Eastern Republic and the Barbarian Tribes a few years ago. My brother was lucky to be a part of it then.”

Cassandra noticed how happy she seemed when talking about her brother. She couldn’t help but smile too. Nebora took a sip of her tea.

“Do you have siblings too?”

Her eyes immediately became a bit sad as she looked down at her cup.

“I had a younger sister... But she was sold too, years ago. I tried to look for her, but I couldn’t find anything about what happened to her or who she was sold to.”

“So you...weren’t born a slave?”

Cassandra shook her head.

“I was born in the south, in the Rain Tribe.”

“Never heard of it.”

“You probably wouldn’t have. The name disappeared many years ago. Every last one of us was hunted down.”

Nebora was shocked.

“What do you mean?”

“My tribe lived to the south of this Empire , near the Riverlands. We were one of many tribes who coexisted there together, in a territory between the Dragon Empire and the Eastern Republic. We knew a war was going on between them, but we were living in a very difficult area. It was mostly dominated by swamps and heavy rain. We never thought we would get involved in the conflict.”

Nebora frowned.

“What happened?”

“I was only nine years old back then so I don’t know all the details, but at some point, someone suspected the tribes were smuggling weapons and information to the other side. Our Chief was captured and tortured...He couldn’t say what he didn’t know, and was killed. After that, they decided it would be better to just wipe us all out. To them, we were a nameless tribe of savages, a risk they didn’t want to take. It was over in one night.”

Nebora was speechless. It was disheartening to think a whole population had been killed over a conflict they hadn’t had any part in. Yet, Cassandra was quite calm as she spoke. It was as if she was just telling a tale. But it wasn’t a tale; it was her story.

She sighed and took another sip.

“How did you survive?”

“They didn’t actually kill everyone...They killed all of the adults and most of the boys. The rest of the boys, and the young girls under twelve, were sold to slave merchants. I was brought to this Empire and sold to my first Master a few days after.”

She didn’t ask anything else. Nebora was reflecting on how she had acted earlier, that childish tantrum of hers. About her being a slave? If she had been unlucky, she could have ended up like Cassandra. Losing her whole family and then being sold like merchandise. Yet, she had been the immature one, while a young woman who had already experienced so much tragedy was so calm and collected in front of her. How could she be so reckless and immature given the harsh world they live in?

Suddenly, a scream resonated through the kitchen as a young girl in a nightgown came running in, straight into Nebora’s arms.

“A spider! There is a spider in my room again!”

“Again? Did you clean your room this week, Bina?”

“I did, I definitely did!”

The girl, who looked no older than fourteen or fifteen, was almost crying, completely panicked. She hid her face in Nebora’s chest, tightly gripping onto her arm like a safety blanket.

“She is very scared of spiders,” explained Nebora with a sigh. “We always get a few around this time of year...”

“Where is her room?” Cassandra asked while getting up.

Nebora frowned as she watched Cassandra look through the trash from that morning.

“The first one on the left... What are you doing?”

Cassandra had gathered some fruit peels, and showed them to Nebora. They were all citrus peels.

“Spiders hate these. If you rub it against your doors and windows they won’t come in.”

“Really?”

Bina had turned her head, hearing a new person, and looked at Cassandra. She was stunned by the young girl’s eyes. One was brown, the other was blue, but the girl was only focused on the citrus peels in Cassandra’s hands.

“Yes. I use this trick all the time so I never get any spiders. You can keep some chestnuts in your room too; that also works well.”

“Alright, let’s go test that theory and chase out that eight-legged monster while we’re at it,” sighed Nebora, getting up. “And after that, everyone to bed. I’m tired!”

