

## Chapter 23

The Fourth Prince glared at them, annoyed. He kept shaking his head, already sulking.

“You’re really one hell of a little pest!” he hissed. “Oh, fine! I never liked that dumbass anyway.”

Missandra gave a triumphant smile to her sister, but it was way too early to rejoice, in Cassandra’s opinion. Could they really trust this Prince? So far, Opheus hadn’t been the most cooperative, and Missandra was basically forcing him to help them now. However, the Sisters were short on options. Moreover, the threat of the War God’s wrath was probably their best weapon at the moment.

The Fourth Prince rolled his eyes, ignoring Missandra to turn to Cassandra with a frown, his fingers twiddling with his long earring.

“Can you really heal Father?”

“I hope so,” said Cassandra with a little nod. “I can’t say before I’ve actually seen him, though. Do you know where he is?”

“Well, Vrehan wasn’t extraordinarily discreet about it. Father was moved to his Chambers, under the pretense of guarding him against any more assassins.”

“They let him do that?”

“Sweetie, in case you haven’t been following, there is no one left to oppose that douche here. Sephir died, Kairen is gone to play with his toys on some faraway battlefield. Who else do you think will show up to tell him what he can and cannot do? He’s the Second Prince!”

“You could have stopped him,” stated Missandra, upset. “You could have saved your own damn father if you had said something.”

Opheus sighed.

“Just you try growing up in a family where everyone happily serves each other poison for breakfast, while the adults watch, darling. I have nothing against my father, but I’m far from being his favorite son. If he remembers me at all, and I have a long list of

siblings who'd only be too happy to stab my back with a sword if they remembered I exist. So sorry about Daddy, but I value my life a tad more."

Though Missandra made a disgusted face, Cassandra couldn't really say she didn't understand his point of view, for she had witnessed it herself many times. All the siblings were in danger, since even before their birth, especially the Princes. Some had to grow with strong personalities, while some like Anour and Opheus, remained quiet and unnoticed. It was one way, just like any other, to try and survive in such an environment. Cassandra stepped forward to address Opheus, speaking softly.

"I understand your position, and I know that what we are asking is putting you in danger, too. But you can't ignore that Vrehan will not stop there. He won't have enough of killing his father and only one or two of his brothers."

Opheus shrugged after a hesitation.

"Why should I care? It's not like I'm a threat to him, I have no children and no will to have any!"

"Do you have no one you care about in this Palace at all?" retorted Cassandra.

This time, her words silenced him. He looked baffled for a few seconds and lost in his thoughts. Opheus had grown up in this Palace. There's no way there was no one here that he didn't hold dear. Maybe he had younger sisters, or lovers that Vrehan could potentially harm. Moreover, heirs or not, his own safety wouldn't be guaranteed either. He couldn't ignore what usually happened to the new Emperor's siblings. After a long while, he sighed.

"Oh, fuck it, we are all going to die anyway."

The Prince walked past them, shaking his head, and actually walked towards the window his dragon was peeping at them from. He scratched his dragon's chin, making the white beast growl softly, and turned to them.

"Come on, I'll give you a ride. Unless you want to walk out into the two idiots my brother has planted there?"

Cassandra and Missandra exchanged a quick concerned look. They weren't exactly fond of the idea of hopping onto a dragon they didn't know and had never seen behave at all before, but it was still better than climbing their way back or risking it in front of the guards. Besides, the White Dragon hadn't been very menacing since the

two of them had seen it. It hadn't even growled once at them, only peeking on their every move without showing animosity.

Cassandra walked his way first, and to her surprise, Opheus actually held out his hand to help her get on his dragon's back. She took it after hesitating for a brief moment, and exchanging a glance with him. Somehow, she hadn't noticed before, but he had some features in common with Kairen, though his face was leaner and his forehead more prominent. It was strange to meet all of Kairen's brothers, and all she was concerned about was which ones did not want her dead.

Somehow, Opheus decided not to extend the courtesy to Missandra, and got on his dragon's back right after her, leaving the younger sister to climb on however she could. His White Dragon was smaller than Krai, but its build was about the same, and it was among the biggest of those Cassandra had seen, roughly the same size as Vrehan's dragon. The dragon seemed of a quiet nature, as it took off quietly as soon as all three of them were seated.

It felt strange for Cassandra to fly again after such a long time, and on a different Dragon's back at that. She had never flown on any other dragon than Krai. The White Dragon didn't need any directions. It quietly circled the large Imperial Palace, leaving the girls to see what was going on on all the roofs. Catapults, giant crossbows, and iron nets extended over some of the gardens. The Imperial Palace was clearly preparing for an attack coming from the sky. Opheus, too, had his eyes on there and shook his head.

"What a moron," he sighed. "Come on, Phe, let's get away."

His dragon growled softly in response, but its big blue eyes were also riveted on all the weapons below. They headed down to one of the halls of the Imperial Palace, one Cassandra had never been to before. She had no idea where they were, but Phe, the White Dragon, landed quietly in a large garden filled with purple flowers. It was extremely quiet around.

Opheus jumped down, and once again, helped Cassandra get off his dragon. Whether he hadn't liked Missandra's attitude earlier or was just acting petty, the younger sister had to get down herself.

"Where are we?" asked Cassandra.

"My chambers. Luckily for you, I happen to be living not far from Vrehan's apartments. I don't know where exactly our father was taken, but at least from here,

you shouldn't have any trouble accessing his place. If you can get past all the guards, that is."

Cassandra's throat tightened a little. It would have been stupid to think the Second Prince would have left his Father completely unguarded. Not only the Imperial Soldiers, but it was very likely that his own militia would be keeping the Emperor locked in there. She sighed. They had found where the Emperor was and got closer to his position, but the hardest part was still to come.

Opheus walked back inside, and the girls naturally followed, as they were completely lost on their position within the Palace. After walking past a few rooms, Cassandra couldn't help but notice a strange detail.

"It's very... quiet here," she said. "You don't have any Imperial Servants in here?"

"No. I hate noise and noisy people. I don't trust any of those little rats either, they are all working for someone in there. I'd rather take care of myself."

Cassandra was impressed. Besides his excessive attitude they had witnessed earlier, he actually seemed like quite a sensible being. Everything inside the rooms and corridors they walked across seemed strangely bare. Actually, it reminded Cassandra of her first days in Kairen's apartments in the Imperial Palace. Just like his older brother, Opheus didn't seem to spend much on decorations or filling his apartments with luxurious items. The bit of furniture they saw was in pastel colors, adding to the quiet atmosphere around. Cassandra spotted a couple of instruments, too, meaning he probably liked music more than noise.

"Opheus? What's going on?"

Two women suddenly emerged from a room on their left. Both looked around their thirties, and were very pretty. The first had short brown hair, almond eyes, and thin lips, and was wearing a long purple dress. Behind her was a younger girl, in purple too, who was almost hiding behind her.

Opheus frowned.

"We have guests," he sighed.

"Guests? Are you kidding? Aside from your crazy mother, you never..."

She stopped talking, frowning at Cassandra.

“I know you. Aren’t you the Third Prince’s Favorite? The White Lily. Why do you look like that?”

Cassandra wasn’t sure what to say. Should she confirm her words, was there a danger in unveiling her identity to that woman? It seemed a bit late, though, she had clearly recognized her. As she hesitated, Opheus sighed.

“Relax, darling. This is my wife, Mariana, and my younger sister is hiding behind her. They won’t talk. Yes, Mari, that’s Kairen’s woman.”

Cassandra was a bit surprised to hear Opheus actually had a wife. He was probably the only one among the Princes, and she had forgotten that one of the actual princes had a wife at all. Was it recent? Before she could wonder more, that woman, Mariana, glared at her husband, looking shocked.

“Are you kidding, Ophe? Didn’t you say we should lay low? With the Emperor being sick and all? And now you bring that woman here? Are you crazy!”

To Cassandra’s surprise, before the Fourth Prince could even answer, Mariana turned to her.

“No offense to you, really, but the situation is freaking tense here, and that idiot said it himself!”

Opheus rolled his eyes.

“I know what I said, but I found those two in Father’s apartments! The little one basically threatened me into helping them, mind you!”

Mariana glanced towards Missandra, and put her hands on her hips.

“Awesome, so now you get bullied around by teenagers? Really, Opheus? I already have to handle your crazy bitch mother, give me some slack!”

“We are not staying,” declared Cassandra, stepping up. “His Highness just helped us not get caught, but we only want to get to the Emperor. We won’t bother you any longer, we don’t want to put you in danger.”

Hearing her actually speak seemed to calm that woman a bit. After one more glare at her husband, Mariana turned to Cassandra, crossing her arms.

“Sorry for the yelling, I have nothing against you, Lady Cassandra. I’m just worried about that crazy Vrehan. He’s fucking lost it. He killed Prince Sephir, no one here is

blind enough to think you're guilty. I remember seeing you with the other concubines, I thought you were a smart but harmless woman. We also heard about the Lady of the Mountain, all the concubines talk.

Cassandra was somewhat touched to hear that most people didn't believe in her being an assassin. That woman, Mariana, seemed to have a lot of common sense and nothing in common with the other Concubines Cassandra had met. After scratching her head, Mariana turned towards the Prince again.

"So, what was the idea here?"

"They get out of here and try to find and help my dad, that's it! Nothing I'm going to concern myself with... hey!"

Before he could end his sentence, Mariana had slapped his shoulder with an angry look.

"Stop being such a baby! You can't let them go in there alone, are you crazy?"

"You're the one who said you were fine with us laying low!" he protested, rubbing his painful shoulder.

"That was before I knew there was someone in this crazy Imperial Palace capable of helping the old man! Stop being a coward, or are you going to let your father die? And your brother's woman, too? What do you think the War God will do to your skinny ass once he finds out?!"

Once again, Opheus let out a long groan of exasperation. Behind Cassandra, Missandra had a hard time not laughing. However, Mariana was not done with him.

"I'm so fed up with you! Do you want Vrehan to get on the throne, perhaps? Because I know I don't! He's going to have us all line up and fucking slaughter us!"

"Fine, fine! Stop hitting me, you crazy woman, I get it!"

If the situation hadn't been so dramatic in itself, it would have been quite funny to witness the Prince being bossed around by his wife... Mariana stopped, though she did threaten him with another slap, making Opheus take one step away from her. She then turned to Cassandra, taking back a serious and gentle expression scarily fast.

"Sorry about that. Anyway, of course, we will help you, especially if there's a chance you can help the Emperor. We don't know much, though, except for the fact that he's

in Vrehan's apartments. No one opposed it when they moved him, so I guess he already had most of the people in the Palace working for him. There are guards, too. Don't worry, though, we can find a way."

"Are you serious?" whispered Opheus, though everyone there could hear him.

Mariana nodded and smiled at him.

"They just need to be able to get in, right? All we need is a distraction. Looks like your crazy mother is going to be useful for once."

The six men guarding the door to the Second Prince's apartments were bored.

They didn't quite understand why a simple entrance door within the Palace was so heavily guarded, as absolutely nothing was going on in that area of the Imperial Palace. Of course, the death of the First Prince had caused quite a stir, but since the funeral had been held in a hurry, and the Second Prince had left, it had been rather quiet. The men actually had no idea what was going on behind those doors, or who they were truly guarding. They were aware of some rumors that the Emperor had been placed in the Second Prince's apartments, but they had no confirmation of it. The servants always talked a lot between themselves, while the soldiers were supposed to keep their tongues tied, unless they wanted to lose their position.

Becoming an Imperial Guard was such a prestigious position, with a heavy salary, yet not much actual work to do, that many envied their position. It took either a lot of work, a lot of money, or good connections to get there. Sometimes a bit of all three, but in any case, they had done the hardest part. Unless they were aiming for a higher position, those men could spend their days guarding doors and simply wait for their paychecks to come. They didn't need to guard the inside of the Princes' or Princesses' apartments, either. Most of them had their own militia, and the others hated any intrusion on their privacy. Plus, there was a long history of Concubines getting into some bad fights over rumors of one another sleeping with the personnel. Since the latest scandal that had the Emperor see red, all of the Imperial Guards had been strictly banned from entering the private chambers of the Imperial Family, unless explicitly being told otherwise.

Those men didn't have much to entertain themselves with. They would lurk at the pretty young servant girls going by, but that was pretty much their only entertainment all day long.

Hence, when the two women appeared at one end of the corridor, they turned heads as soon as they heard the first screaming. Those among the soldiers who recognized them frowned or chuckled nervously, already aware of what was going on.

“You useless little bitch!” the middle-aged woman yelled. “You can’t even give me one heir, one! What did you marry my son for if it’s for just standing here like a decorative vase?! You’re useless! Useless!”

“Take it down a notch, you old harpy! Fucking get a grip! Because Ophe agreed to marry me doesn’t mean I’m gonna pop out a child within the year!”

“Don’t call him so familiarly before you even get pregnant! I don’t know why my son was so adamant about marrying you, but you better give me a grandson quickly, or I’ll have your head!”

“My head? And what are you going to do with it? Did you forget that I am his wife? He can’t get another woman, now. I’m never allowing it, so you better be happy with who you got and suck it up!”

The soldiers were trying hard not to laugh at the scene. Aside from the Imperial Concubine, no one was blind as to why the Fourth Prince had agreed to marry Lady Mariana. Certainly not to produce any heirs, for one. It was even quite surprising that his mother was still holding on to the pitiful illusion that Prince Opheus could ever produce any children, given his tastes. Lady Mariana was actually doing a good job of acting as his fence against his delusional mother, but even the Emperor had completely given up on his Fourth Son...and his hysterical mother.

“I should have never agreed to that! You’re just a useless, little, scheming swine! You did it all for the money! And to kill me! You’re going to kill me!”

“Yes, yes... Aren’t we getting a little big on the drama, mother-in-law?” said Mariana, ignoring her to keep going towards the soldiers.

“You’re useless! Useless!” Kept screaming the woman behind her.

“Old hag,” sighed Mariana, approaching the men with a smile. “Sorry about the ruckus, soldiers. Can I go in? I was supposed to have tea with Concubine Gloriata, but I can’t find her.”

The men felt a bit flustered at one of the Princesses addressing them so politely and gently. They were more used to the rude and mighty attitude of the concubines.



Moreover, Mariana was a very pretty woman, and she was standing a bit closer than normal in her flattering purple dress.

“S-Sorry, Princess Mariana, we are not supposed to let anyone in.”

“What? Really?” she said, looking surprised. “Is everything alright in there? I...”

“You swine! I’m not done talking!” yelled the woman behind her.

“Oh, shut up!” roared Mariana, turning to her. “Can’t you see that I’m talking to these gentlemen? Do you have to make a fuss all the time? I don’t know how Ophe’s put up with you all these years!”

“He is my son, you little bitch! I am his mother, he’s nothing without me!”

“Isn’t it the other way around?” sighed Mariana.

The Imperial Soldiers chuckled, some blushing a little bit too. As soon as she saw that, the Imperial Concubine glared at them, and became even more hysterical, agitating her cane all around.

“How dare you laugh! You punks! You useless men! You good-for-nothing!”

With each word, she was dangerously swinging her cane around, making the Imperial Guards dodge it or experience painful hits. She was one of the only Concubines about as old as the Emperor, and though she had lost his favor long ago, the Imperial Guards were completely flustered at how to deal with her.

“Imperial Concubine, please, calm down.”

“Calm down? You’re telling me to calm down?” yelled the Imperial Concubine. “I’ll have you hung! Or beheaded! And then drowned!”

“Oh, really...” sighed Mariana.

While the men were flustered and trying to control the old lady, behind them, they didn’t notice the trio that were walking on their toes to get to the door. Opheus’ mother was so awfully noisy and agitated that even she didn’t see her own son sneaking behind the Imperial Guards and into the Second Prince’s apartments. Mariana smiled, seeing that they had succeeded, but she got hit by the cane right after, making her remember that she had inherited the worst part of the plan.

As soon as they were inside, Opheus guided Cassandra and Missandra towards a quiet room, apparently familiar with their surroundings. He checked inside to verify it was empty before letting the girls in. All three of them released a long sigh of relief.

“That’s one crazy old woman,” said Missandra, immediately getting a glare from her older sister.

“You have no idea,” sighed Opheus. “If it wasn’t for Mari, she’d be still sneaking girls into my bedroom every night. A nightmare, I swear. Oh, anyway, we are in. Now we need to find Father.”

“Do you have an idea where he could be?”

The Fourth Prince shook his head with a frown.

“Not really... I’ve only been here a few times when I was younger. My mother and his were close a long time ago, though it might just have been to try to get rid of each other. They did end up trying to kill each other until Lady Kareen became the favorite and they changed objectives. Lovely ladies. Anyway, I think the bedrooms were that way, but it is definitely going to be guarded by Vrehan’s personal militia.”

“Any way around?”

Opheus took a few seconds to think, fidgeting with his earring again.

“There are some rooms that were only used for storage back in the day,” he said.

“Mari and I used to sneak in there when the Imperial Concubines were having tea, to be alone.”

“Mariana is a childhood friend?” asked Cassandra, surprised.

“She’s been an Imperial Servant here since she was young, and my best friend. If my Mother wanted to punish me, she’d take it out on her.”

Cassandra was surprised. She hadn’t thought some friendships could actually occur between members of the Imperial Family and the servants, since the gap between the two was so large. However, seeing how Opheus had always gone against his family’s usual patterns, it wasn’t too surprising. He had probably married Mariana so they could protect each other. It was a rather touching story, not something she would have suspected to occur inside the Imperial Palace.

Once again making sure there was no one ahead of them, Opheus and the two young women walked out of the room, cautious. They could actually still hear the screams of the Imperial Concubine from time to time, and Opheus made a grimace every time. They carefully took one corridor after another, but if there were any servants around, they had probably gone to see what was going on at the entrance. After a while, though, Opheus started frowning a lot.

“It’s strange. I don’t remember this place being so deserted when I was young.”

That sentence made the girls worry, but it was too late to turn back. Indeed, the atmosphere in this area was a bit unusual. Most of the doors were locked, and it felt like no one had ventured here in a very long time. Cassandra realized that she was getting the same feeling from when she had seen Kairen’s childhood bedroom. It felt sad and desolate around here, but she couldn’t tell why. It was rather clean, but there wasn’t a soul around. The further they walked in, the more that uneasy feeling grew.

All the doors they walked by on their left side were locked, and there were barely a couple of windows on their right, for the light to get in. They had slowed down their pace, since their steps resonated in the silence. Even Opheus kept a sour face on.

“It’s weird,” said Missandra. “We haven’t come across a single servant or guard since we came into the area. If that crazy prince is so on guard, why is there absolutely no one here?”

Cassandra didn’t have an answer, but she felt just the same. Something was strange. It was as if no one was allowed here at all. Even if that area was completely deserted, there should at least have been a couple of guards or a servant sweeping the dust.

However, they had no time to stop and check what was going on behind those closed doors. In a tacit agreement, they kept going, following Opheus’ lead.

Suddenly, an old maid appeared out of the blue at one of the intersections. She was carrying a tray with food, and she froze upon seeing them, looking shocked. Opheus moved immediately to stand between the sisters and the maid, preventing her from seeing their faces.

However, the old woman looked more shocked to see him, her hands shaking on the tray of food.

“W... What are you doing here... That... This area is forbidden.”

“Sorry, I was coming to see my brother,” Opheus lied. “Who is that food for?”

The maid went even paler, stepping back as he was stepping closer.

“Ah... No... no one, Sir...”

“No one? This is a large detour for someone going to the main area. You’re carrying a lot of food too.”

Opheus was stepping closer and closer to the old maid, but she kept stepping back, visibly terrified. She had the face of someone who didn’t want to get caught, and from the direction of her feet, was probably considering running away. Yet, before she could take another step, the Fourth Prince suddenly grabbed her, and the tray of food fell loudly.

“Who was that food for?” he insisted.

“I...I’m sorry, Your Highness, I can’t tell,” whimpered the old woman.

“Is it for my father?” he asked.

“N-no...”

Opheus asked her again, insisting, but Cassandra had her eyes on the food she had left on the ground. This didn’t look like a meal that would have been given to a sick old man... but to a pregnant woman. She recognized some of the food Kareen had been insistent on having her eat while she was pregnant with Kassian, at the Diamond Palace.

“P-please let me go,” said the old woman. “If Her Highness k-knows...”

“Her Highness? Who?”

Either she had talked too much or not enough, the old woman was now bitterly regretting it. Moreover, Opheus was tightening his grip on her wrist and threatening her with a glare. Just like the rest of his family, the Imperial Prince was well aware of his power, and he kept going until the old woman got teary and talked.

“L-Lady... Madeen...”

Cassandra frowned. She knew that name, it was the name of Vrehan’s Favorite, the mother of his first son. If there was someone else that they should fear crossing paths with in that place, while Vrehan and Phetra were gone, it had to be that woman.

Opheus wasn’t done interrogating the maid, however.

“Who was that food for, then? Madeen isn’t pregnant!”

This time, the old maid stayed resolutely mute. However, her eyes slipped to one of the doors for a second, and Missandra caught that. She ran to the said door, trying to open it, but it wouldn’t.

“She must have a key!” said Missandra.

“Ah, no!” screamed the old woman.

Before she could yell anymore, Opheus grabbed her chin, and brutally flipped her head around, killing her immediately. Cassandra let out a shocked cry, while Missandra frowned.

“Did you really have to kill that poor old lady?”

“She would have been killed by Madeen anyway,” retorted Opheus, crouching down to search her. “If you want to cry, find a corner, darling, but do it later.”

Missandra sighed, but he probably wasn’t wrong. He suddenly found a key and walked up to her with a sigh.

“Why are we doing this, anyway?” he said.

“Because whatever that sicko wants to hide is good for us to know,” retorted Missandra, opening the door.

The door gave in with a creaking, despite Missandra’s attempt to open it quietly. Inside, it was awfully dark. There was no window, and the only light came from behind them, the corridor they were standing in already rather dark itself. Cassandra frowned, and stepped forward, past her sister to venture inside, while Opheus stayed behind them with a frown.

Though they could barely see anything, she could feel a presence. She waited a few seconds for her eyes to get used to the dark and looked for the source of the faint breathing she could hear. This was a room with nothing but a bed. On the bed, was a young woman, curled up against the wall, staring at her with a frightened expression. She had long black hair, black eyes, tanned skin, and was heavily pregnant.

Cassandra was rendered speechless. What was that young woman doing locked up here? She had a chain around her ankle, too. She looked absolutely terrorized. Her

eyes were opened wide while staring at Cassandra, and she was curling up the furthest away from her she could get, shivering like an injured animal.

Cassandra gently stepped closer, while Missandra and Opheus were left in awe at the doorstep. The young woman curled up even more, obviously afraid of her. In her appearance, she was somewhat reminding Cassandra of herself, months ago. She was very skinny except for her womb, and her lower lip was cut. Her body bore traces of old bruises, scars, and everything in her attitude screamed fear. Her long black hair was strangely short in some places as if someone had randomly cut it, and some of those strands were still lying on the ground. She was wearing a worn-out green dress, too.

“Who is that?” muttered Missandra, turning to Opheus.

The Prince shook his head. He had no idea, or wasn't sure, but all three of them could see that the young woman had features of the Imperial Family. It was very unsettling to notice that, with her current state. Cassandra took a deep breath, and got closer, being careful not to scare her. The woman was obviously traumatized, not used to seeing strangers, and she didn't want to scare her.

“Hinue, what are you doing?” whispered Missandra, a bit worried.

“We can't leave that poor woman here,” replied Cassandra.

She looked for the chain, but it was closed with a lock on the woman's ankle.

“Mie, give me the key from earlier.”

Gently, Cassandra approached the key from that woman's ankle. Each of her movements was extremely gentle, clearly letting that poor girl see what she was about to do. That unknown woman hadn't uttered a single word so far, and Cassandra suspected that she wouldn't. Her quiet wailing was the only sound they had heard from her, and she was shivering non-stop, unable to avert her eyes for one second. It was as if they had locked eyes and neither of them could look away.

Cassandra tried the key on the lock, but it didn't match. She frowned, upset.

“This isn't going to work...”

“Let me see,” said Missandra, walking up to her with a sigh.

Her younger sister stared at the lock for a while, and turned to Opheus after a minute.

“Can I borrow your earring?”

The Prince seemed confused at her request, but handed it to her. Under their eyes, Missandra started fidgeting and trying to force the lock with it. Cassandra didn't know if she should have been surprised at her younger sister's skill, but she was scared to ask how in the world she had picked that one up.

After a few seconds, they heard a click, and the iron ring fell on the bed.

“You little thief,” chuckled Opheus.

As soon as he had talked, though, the young woman suddenly whimpered, staring at him like he was absolutely terrifying, and curled up even more on one end of her bed. Cassandra's heart broke a little witnessing this, and she turned to Opheus.

“Your Highness, would you mind... stepping outside a little? You're... scaring her.”

For a few seconds, Prince Opheus made an offended look, but that woman's pitiful attitude was not something he could ignore. He eventually rolled his eyes over and backed away a little. Cassandra waited until he was completely out of sight, and gently rubbed the poor woman's ankle.

“It's alright... We won't hurt you,” she whispered.

“Hinue, what do we do?”

Cassandra hesitated. She could never leave that woman here in her state. She was obviously malnourished and mistreated by whoever had locked her up in here. Cassandra had a faint idea of her identity, too, but whether it would be confirmed later or not wasn't her priority for now. She took a deep breath and turned to Missandra.

“Take her to Lady Mariana, she will know what to do.”

“What? But you...”

“I will keep going with Prince Opheus to find the Emperor. Missandra, we can't leave that poor woman here. Moreover, she is already dressed as a servant, and chances are high the Imperial Guards will have no idea who she is either. Grab the tray outside, and you can walk out with her and pretend you two were just bringing out some food for one of the Concubines here. They won't worry about someone going out if they never saw you coming in, and if anything happens, Lady Mariana will be around to vouch for you.”

Missandra hesitated, glancing at the woman. Would that plan work? That poor woman looked barely able to understand what was going on. Cassandra insisted.

“Missandra, please. We can’t leave her like that. It might be her only chance to ever escape this place and whatever they did to her. You know I can’t leave someone in need, and she is pregnant, too.”

Missandra sighed.

“Fine, fine. Don’t worry, I’ll find a way to take her out of here, and to Lady Mariana... God, Hinue, I hope we are not going to get ourselves killed for being too nice, once again. Be careful, please. Even that Prince just killed a grandma without feeling the slightest regret about it.”

Cassandra smiled faintly to her. She had a heavy heart about letting Missandra leave here with that woman, but on the other hand, she would probably be safer out of Prince Vrehan’s apartments, with Lady Mariana. If anything happened here, at least Missandra would have higher chances to survive. She had the wits to make it out by herself, and Cassandra highly doubted many people in here would even recognize her as her younger sister.

“So?” asked Prince Opheus as soon as she stepped out of that room. “I already hid the body in another one of the rooms, which actually was a storage room this time.”

“Missandra will take care of... whoever this is. We should find the Emperor quickly. Someone will notice that old servant’s disappearance sooner or later.”

Opheus frowned for a second, surprised by her decision to part ways with her younger sister, but he eventually nodded. With one last look at the room where Missandra was left with the pregnant woman, they both got on their way, still trying to be as discreet as possible.

“Do you really have no idea who that woman was?” whispered Cassandra.

“No... I mean, maybe, but... to be honest, I might not like the answer.”

She nodded. No matter how they looked at it, if Prince Opheus couldn’t recognize a young woman that looked so much like him and his siblings, something was definitely off and wrong about it. Moreover, if that young woman really was a member of the Imperial Family, for her to be locked up like this couldn’t mean anything good. The fact that she was locked up in Vrehan’s apartments was a big clue, and Cassandra clearly remembered the story about that missing sister of his, but... that pregnancy was



a heavy mystery, too. She hadn't said a word, but Cassandra had immediately thought about that abortion potion Phetra had asked for, and she was sure Missandra had caught onto that too.

Cassandra's thoughts couldn't spend too much time on that matter, though. She and the Fourth Prince were still looking for his father, and they had no idea how far or close he could be. They finally arrived at the end of the forbidden area, Opheus putting an arm out to stop her before they turned a corner.

"Guards," he whispered.

Cassandra could hear them. The private militia of the Second Prince was most likely guarding the area, just as they had suspected. She frowned. How to get past them? They wouldn't be fooled as easily as the Imperial Guards, and they were out of decoys.

Next to her, Opheus took a deep breath in, shaking his head.

"This is the moment where I know I'm going to regret this," he sighed.

Glancing at Cassandra, he brought his index to his lips, indicating for her to remain there and quiet, and suddenly stepped out, his hands on his hips.

Cassandra gasped, but covered her mouth and waited, listening to what was happening just a few steps away.

"You!" exclaimed the Prince. "Go and get me some eighteen-month refined jujubes!"

"Ju... Your Highness, no one is supposed to enter the Second Prince's residence while he is..."

"How dare you talk back!" yelled Opheus, his voice going a little higher-pitched. "I gave you an order! Or do you think you can disobey an Imperial Prince!"

"That's not it, Your Highness, but His Highness the Second Prince ordered us to..."

"Oh, so now you think I'm not worth the trouble? Because I'm only the fourth? Is that what you are saying? I am not a real Prince, perhaps? I don't deserve obedience? You think anyone in my brother's household is allowed to disrespect me? Are you talking for Vrehan when you ignore me? Is that what your master told you? The second is better than the fourth, so you can just ignore him? Hm? What do I do to get some respect around here! Ah, poor me! I don't even deserve to be obeyed by my older

brother's men! All of this because I was the fourth born? Is that how my brothers are showing their consideration? Shall I go tell this dear Mother of mine how her beloved son is disrespected? Huh?"

Despite the current situation, Cassandra had to repress a chuckle. The Fourth Prince might deserve a prize for his acting skill. Opheus was talking non-stop, pressuring them relentlessly and she could hear all the men getting flustered by the sudden threat. The poor guards started talking all at once as soon as Opheus gave them a chance to, making a little ruckus. She mostly heard them begging Opheus to keep his mother out of this. She waited a bit more, but he wasn't done.

"Really? Aren't you just standing there for nothing then! What is there even to guard when he isn't here! You are so busy you can't even obey me? This Prince is hungry and you are all letting me starve! Where is it? There is no damn servant in this Palace, and all I can find is you useless people!"

"W-we have to guard, though, Y-Your Highness..."

"Guard what? Walls, perhaps? Three concubines sipping tea? What do you think I'm going to do with those women anyway?!"

The flustered guards seemed at a loss for words, mumbling something Cassandra couldn't understand again. Opheus wasn't giving them much space left to protest, as they probably couldn't talk about the Emperor either. The guards were obviously at a loss on what to do without risking offending an Imperial Prince. They most likely feared there would be retribution later if they didn't obey him.

"We... we will send someone, Your Highness..."

"You better hurry! I want eighteen month-dried jujubes, a full bottle of wine, three red apples..."

The list went on and on, and Cassandra did not even know what half of his requests were about. Was he making up some of those on purpose? With the list being so long, the guards would have no choice but to send a lot of people to gather up all the items. Did that mean Vrehan had really left no servant in his aisle? That made it easier for them, but also didn't mean anything good for the Emperor.

After a while, she heard some of the men leaving. She had no idea how many there were initially, but Opheus' long list was obviously meant to reduce their number. He kept scolding for a while, and Cassandra was getting nervous. He was never going to be able to get rid of all of those men, there were at least half a dozen.

“You two,” said the Prince.

Cassandra froze. There were only two men left?

“What are you doing?”

“We will wait with you for the others to return, Your Highness. We have to stay behind to follow the Second Prince’s orders to guard this place.”

“I see... I didn’t know my brother was so adamant about guarding this place. Why are you two here instead of patrolling around, anyway?”

“We were given orders to stay here specifically.”

“I see...”

She suddenly heard a loud noise, and closed her eyes by reflex. Cassandra recognized the sounds of a fight and, for a few seconds, she pondered about checking if Opheus was alright. However, if she came out too soon, she risked getting them both killed. Not knowing what was happening just a few steps away was frightening. For the next few seconds, Cassandra stood there and listened. Then, she clearly heard two weights hitting the floor.

“You can come out.”

She let out a little sigh of relief. When Cassandra stepped out of her hiding, the two guards were dead at Opheus’ feet, their throats sliced open in a little puddle of blood that was growing. She was disgusted but impressed. Those two men were Imperial Guards, but he had gotten rid of both of them within a minute. The Prince didn’t drop a pearl of sweat either, while the two men were obviously in a bad shape.

“Let’s hurry,” said Opheus, not commenting on what had just happened. “We probably don’t have long until the others come back.”

Cassandra nodded. She carefully walked past both bodies, but they had nowhere to actually hide them. They had no time to find a good hiding place either.

Opheus pushed a door that was on their left, letting her walk in first. It was a very large bedroom, with what was most likely a large bed hidden by curtains at one end. Cassandra almost ran there, but Opheus caught her wrist before she lifted the curtain. Gently pushing her behind him, he lifted it first. A wave of relief appeared on his face.

The old Emperor was lying there, looking very pale, but his eyes were open and staring at the two of them.

“Your Highness!”

“Father...” whispered Opheus.

Cassandra was astonished. How could he have lost so much weight in such a short time!

“White Lily...” whispered the Emperor.

For the first time, his appearance matched his age, but he looked very sick. Cassandra could tell he had a high fever without even touching him, and the bony hand he raised was even thinner than hers. He grabbed her hand, shaking his head.

“Your Highness, what happened?”

“Vrehan did this to you?”

“You... Your son...”

Cassandra was astonished. He was asking about Kassian now? What was going on?

“He is born, Your Highness, he is fine. But please, tell me what they did to you? Did they make you eat something?”

“Good...” whispered the Emperor with a smile.

Cassandra was devastated. He couldn't even seem to hear her questions, the poor man looked so weakened. He was nothing like the mighty Emperor she had seen just a few weeks ago. All this time, she had prayed for him to be alive. She had hoped to be able to save the Emperor, but he was already on the brink of death!

Aside from the erratic, raspy breathing of the Emperor, there was a horrible silence weighing on them. Cassandra had no idea what to do. His lips were somewhat swollen and purple, his mouth was dry, and the old Emperor was obviously running an agonizing fever. He had lost a lot of weight, too. She wondered if there was even anything she could do when he was already this bad? She looked around for something to help, but there was only a small basin of water - it couldn't be that the poor old man had simply been left to die here! This was the Emperor, for goodness sake!

Next to her, Opheus looked just as shocked and lost as she was. He hadn't given much thought about his father's reported illness, but seeing the powerful figure now lying in bed as a sickly, dying old man was too much for him. He stumbled back, lost for words.

Cassandra couldn't just sit on the sidelines. She looked around again, trying to find something, anything that could help. She ran to the little basin of water, tearing some of her dress's fabric to make a compress. The water was barely lukewarm, which made her even angrier. How was it possible that the Emperor wasn't receiving proper care? She walked back to him and wiped the sweat from his brow. He was no longer the Emperor to her, now, he was a patient. A patient in critical condition, who she couldn't allow to die like this, especially not before she had tried everything she could to save him.

“White Lily...”

“Your Highness, what did they do to you?” she asked, desperate for an answer. “Did you eat or drink something? Do you remember what it tasted like?”

Cassandra was struggling to hold back her tears. If she had been in a proper medical space with all of her plants, she may have been able to do something. If only she had a clue about what had been done to the Emperor, any indication towards what he may have been given. She might have had a chance of figuring something out, but it seemed to be that his state was far too desperate now. She had been too hopeful in thinking she would get here in time, to find a cure for whatever ailed him. She never imagined that it would be too late already.

Her fingers were trembling on the little piece of wet cloth, as she kept questioning in utter despair. Opheus remained silent, slowly coming to the understanding of how bad this really was.

“We have to move him.”

He turned to her, staring at Cassandra as if she was crazy.

“Move him? We will be lucky if we get out of here alive! We can't move him too!”

“But we have no choice!” she retorted, almost crying. “I can't heal him here, I can't. I...I have nothing, and he is...”

Opheus sighed, and knelt down, grabbing Cassandra's shoulder. He couldn't look at his father as he tried to contain his own emotions.

“Cassandra, you can’t. I am no physician, but I am not blind either. There is nothing you can do to save my father, dear, not here or anywhere else. It’s just... too late.”

She refused to hear it.

Cassandra wasn’t an unreasonable woman, but this truth was just too bitter for her to swallow. Their entire journey here, she had been looking forward to the moment she could heal the Emperor. She needed his help and to have him set things straight - to make sure Kairen was named as his successor, to make sure her family would be safe from his brother’s madness... to finally put an end to all this. She really thought they had a chance as long as Vrehan wasn’t there.

She hadn’t thought things here would have been so bad so soon. How many people inside this Imperial Palace had rallied to Vrehan’s side already? How long had he been planning this? Maybe she couldn’t see the truth, or just didn’t want to, but there had been clues - like how poorly guarded this place was. There were far fewer soldiers than she had thought there would be because there wasn’t any way left to save the Emperor. Vrehan had deserted the Palace, confident that he had already won this battle. His father was going to die.

What had he used? Poison? The purple lips of the Emperor suggested as much. She wished she could have gotten at least one answer. Maybe then she wouldn’t have felt so powerless.

“Your Highness...”

“White Lily, don’t... worry,” muttered the old man. “Just... the lake...”

Cassandra frowned. The lake? What about the lake? Was he delusional? She tried to get more from him, but the old Emperor was weakening by the minute. Her heart was so heavy, seeing life leave his eyes with no way to help him. She leaned over his bed, trying to make sense of his fractured whispers. Opheus had his hands on her shoulders, but he didn’t dare to get any closer. Though they had never been close, he was somehow affected by the death of his father more than he thought he would be.

“Your Highness, what are you talking about?” she asked, clumsily wiping away her tears.

“What lake?”

Was this a dying man’s wish? Or something he had to confess? Cassandra was at a loss once again.

“And... Kareen... I’m sorry... I’m sorry...”

“Your Highness, you have to hold on, please,” she begged. “Kairen will be here soon. I promise that he is on his way back, with the Imperial Army. We can...”

“Kareen... And the dress...”

None of what he was saying was making any sense to her. Was he reminiscing about old memories of Lady Kareen? She couldn’t tell. Why was he talking about a lake and a dress? Cassandra had no idea. Could she comfort him, or at least find a way to ease his pain? He didn’t look to be in pain, just...

“Father?”

To her surprise, Opheus finally stepped forward, grabbing his father’s hand. He seemed like he was about to say something, but then just his lower lip quivered, and he stayed mute. A veil of emotions covered his face, and Cassandra’s heart broke a little more at witnessing it.

This was the reality of being an Emperor’s child. They hadn’t had a real bond, not the one that should have existed between a Father and his Son. Yet, the bond was present now, manifesting itself at the cruelest moment possible. Cassandra felt his pain resonate through her whole body and she felt even more sad, even more defeated.

Opheus simply held his father’s hand in a long, painful silence. The Emperor turned his head to him and faintly smiled, closing his eyes to help mask some of the pain. Cassandra couldn’t take it anymore. Tears escaped from her eyes, and she bit her lower lip, devastated. He was truly dying, and she was there, powerless.

“How touching.”

Cassandra and Opheus turned around in the same movement, surprised to hear a third voice.

To their left, coming from another door was Prince Lephys, standing in the doorway with an annoyed expression. The Fifth Prince was draped in his purple robe, leaning against the wall with an evil smirk plastered on his face. He was staring at both of them, shaking his head.

“You really had to make a dumb mistake now, Opheus.”

The Fourth Prince placed himself between Lephys and their father, looking furious.

“You fucking knew.”

Lephys rolled his eyes, shrugged, and then stepped closer.

“Of course I knew, you idiot. Vrehan was always going to need an ally inside the Imperial Palace, and who else but me would have gone along with it?”

“Why?” asked Cassandra, shocked. “This is your father!”

“My father?” scoffed Lephys. “You call that man a father? Do you have any idea what kind of father he is? He might be nice towards Kairen and Shareen, but do you think anyone else in this Imperial Palace holds any fond memories of our dear daddy? Really? What do you say, Opheus?”

Cassandra glanced at the Fourth Prince, but he obviously had nothing to answer to that. Lephys was right in many ways, and even Cassandra couldn't say otherwise. The Fifth Prince took another step closer. He was acting arrogant and totally unaffected by the dying old man behind them.

“A father,” he spat. “What kind of father doesn't give a damn about his children dying? How many of our siblings do you think died over the years? Father had so many concubines, they all gave birth to his children... when they didn't lose them or die first.”

“His Highness was not responsible for those murders,” retorted Cassandra. “The concubines...”

“Oh, I know. The concubines are the ones who always dirtied their hands. One of their rivals was pregnant? Let's kill her. The baby was born safely? Let's kill it! Who needs more children, anyway? The Emperor already has so many!”

Cassandra glanced at the Emperor, unable to contest that. She knew all too well how nefarious this family was. She would never forget the horror stories of how Lady Kareen had lost three of her children. That was one fear that had been growing in Cassandra's mind ever since Lady Kareen had shared her story - that one day, sooner or later, Kassian would become a target, that he already was. She couldn't stand the idea of a child being injured or killed, let alone one of her own!

None of his children had done anything to warrant that kind of life. Their only crime was being born. They were conceived with no say in the matter and then used as political pawns, killed or maimed before they were even able to understand the cruel world they had been born into. Even those who survived beyond birth and into



childhood, had to endure the scheming and rivalries. No one made it out without countless scars, both physical and emotional - the pain of losing siblings, enduring hateful step-mothers, and half-siblings. They all had to face too many monstrosities.

“Do you know how many brothers and sisters I’ve lost through the years? I saw five of them die, but there were many more. My own mother died, poisoned, and yet he didn’t bat an eyelid. See, to the Emperor, no one but his precious Favorite and her children ever mattered. All the other women and children were only there for his own pleasure. He’s the kind of man who didn’t even shed a tear as his own children died, and yet you’re crying for him? You are wasting your tears on a narcissistic bastard”

Cassandra felt horribly perturbed listening to this.

She understood where Lephys’ hatred came from. Even his hatred towards Kareen and her children could be somewhat justified, as he had suffered from their mere existence. Yet, Cassandra couldn’t agree with any of this. She shifted slightly, placing herself between the Emperor and Lephys.

“You can’t trust Vrehan either,” she said. “Your Second Brother will try to get rid of you, too, as soon as he gets the throne.”

“I really don’t think so. I am his ally after all. Do you honestly think Vrehan would have taken control of our father’s council so easily, if it wasn’t for my help?”

“You son of a... What the hell did you do?” growled Opheus.

Lephys chuckled.

“Oh, I was rather involved. Do you know how many concubines I have, Opheus? How many of those women are the daughters of ministers, scholars, generals? It wasn’t easy, but if you look carefully, all those women are nothing but pawns to their families. If I merely hinted to one that they might stand a chance at becoming my wife, the desperate whore would run back to her father and arrange any form of support I needed! It’s like having my own little army! A bunch of little sluts, all ready to do anything I want, just for a little hope I’d make her my wife.”

Cassandra was disgusted. This man was completely rotten to the core, to use his concubines like mere tools, just to get what he wanted! Was that why Vrehan had decided to include him in his plan? It explained so many things! She hadn’t understood how he could have taken control of the Imperial Palace so easily by himself. However, with three of the Princes absent, and one of the remaining two on

his side, all Vrehan had needed to do was get rid of the Emperor, and then all of his associates would have no choice but to fall in line!

“And you call our father scum?” retorted Opheus, disgusted. “Would you call yourself a saint, perhaps? You’re worse than our father ever was!”

“Am I?” asked Lephys, tilting his head. “I am not doing anything our father hasn’t done before. Actually, I’m probably nicer since I don’t single out any favorites. He used my mother and sisters like pawns for his own entertainment, for nothing but to make his Favorite jealous. What am I doing that’s the same?”

“You’re wrong,” snapped Cassandra. “It’s true that His Highness loves Lady Karen, but he never wanted your siblings’ deaths!”

“Oh, are you trying to make me cry for the old man, princess?” chuckled Lephys. “Don’t bother, I truly don’t care about his death. As soon as he passes, I will have Vrehan officially named as the new Emperor.”

“Just you wait until Kairen comes back and wipes the floor with your blood...” hissed Opheus.

Lephys chuckled once more.

“Kairen? Oh, you are sorely mistaken if you think our precious War God could simply fly in here. We have the whole roof trapped, and every single wall. As soon as we spot his Black Dragon, our entire army will attack. He will be taken down as easily as a fly!”

Opheus laughed.

“Is that why you hid Father’s Dragon? You and Vrehan are such cowards. You’re too scared to face Kairen on your own, so you’ve had to resort to underhanded tactics! Did that coward also leave you alone to defend the Imperial Palace, Lephys?”

Saying that, Opheus took out a little dagger that he had hidden up his sleeve. Lephys’ eyes suddenly went cold as ice upon seeing this, drawing out a long whip in response.

“You dare oppose me, Brother? You are many things, Opheus, but you are not a fighter. Are you really willing to die for this woman? For Kairen’s woman?”

Cassandra feared where this was headed. She didn’t know how strong either brother was, but a fight in such a tight space, a dagger against a whip, did not leave her with a

good feeling. She kept glancing at the Fourth Prince, but his expression spoke volumes. This fight would not be an easy win.

She glanced over her shoulder at the Emperor. He wasn't dead yet, but his breathing was definitely slowing down, maybe a few hours or a few minutes, but it wouldn't be getting any better. Cassandra had no idea how far out Kairen was, but she couldn't afford to wait for him any longer.

"Don't," she suddenly interrupted.

Lephys looked at her, as if he was amused.

"What is it? You don't want to see me kill my brother? Trust me, it will be over quickly."

"Don't fight," she repeated. "I want to make a deal with you."

This was obviously a desperate attempt on her part, but she was desperate. The brothers were about to fight and Cassandra could see very few ways that they might get out of there alive or unharmed, but she was determined to make it happen. While she felt cornered, she wanted to at least make sure Opheus and his father could make it out to somewhere safe. Anywhere out of the Fifth and Second's Princes reach would be perfect, as the revelation of their alliance came at the worst possible time - Cassandra hadn't seen it coming at all. But the Fourth Prince hadn't asked to be involved in the first place, and if there was the tiniest chance that he could walk out unharmed, she at least owed him that. He had risked so much for her until now, though sometimes reluctantly, and she couldn't allow him to get killed if it was avoidable. It would be entirely her fault.

Meanwhile, the Fifth Prince raised an eyebrow, visibly surprised by her sudden proposal. He still had that annoying smirk on, something that reminded her of his other family members. She wasn't particularly happy about making a deal with the man and, strangely, she wished Missandra was here. Her younger sister was much better at thinking on her feet in situations like this and would surely have been able to come up with a plan, but she wasn't here and Cassandra would have to face this on her own.

"What kind of deal did you have in mind?" laughed the Fifth Prince. "Do you really think you have anything to offer that I don't already have?"

"You can have me," she said.

Glancing at Cassandra, Lephys and Opheus both looked confused. She took a deep breath, trying to think like Missandra would.

“I am not bargaining with you,” he hissed.

Cassandra wasn't going to let it go so easily. She saw him twitch when she first suggested it.

“You don't want to fight your brother,” she coerced. “It is a waste of precious time and unnecessary injuries. Regardless of who'd win, you have nothing to gain by battling each other. So, instead of... fighting him, I'll follow you without resisting. You can have me, if you leave this place without fighting Prince Opheus.”

This time, Lephys pinched his lips, looking doubtful.

“Why would you do that?”

“I will let you take me without resisting, on the condition that you leave the Emperor and Opheus out of this. You leave them here, and I will follow you to your residence, or the cells, or wherever you want me to go.”

The Fifth Prince laughed, staring at her like she was crazy.

“Why would I want you? What kind of value do you have? You are nothing, just Kairen's whore!”

“I am his favorite,” she retorted. “Unlike your concubines, I am the only one he cares deeply about. We both know he will come for me, no matter what trap you have set.”

This time, Lephys seemed to hesitate, staring at her suspiciously.

Cassandra wasn't sure of anything, so she was making it up as she went along. The reality was, she wasn't sure of when or how her Prince would get back here, but she had faith that he would come for her. Something in her heart told her that he was coming back for her. He would never leave the Imperial Palace, or her, in Vrehan's hands. Maybe he was dealing with his brother elsewhere, but if Vrehan was still chasing after her and Missandra, they would both be coming here.

The fact that Kareen had already placed spies around her residence indicated that the Imperial Concubine was betting that the final battle would take place in the Capital, too. Even if he had been left behind by his brother, Lephys couldn't ignore the fact that his brothers would end up back here sooner or later.

“So you’re offering yourself as a hostage?” he asked.

Cassandra nodded bravely. Next to her, Opheus was utterly shocked by her sudden change in attitude.

“Are you crazy, woman!?” he yelled.

“It’s alright,” she said.

“Nothing is alright! You can’t do this!”

Cassandra turned to him, though she made sure to keep the Fifth Prince in her field of vision as well. She took a deep breath, trying to convey her words in the best way possible for him to understand.

“I’m sorry, Prince Opheus. If there is anyone else in this Palace who can do something for the Emperor, I don’t think it’s me anymore. If I had the proper equipment to help, I would try anything, but I’m no longer in that position. It would only buy him a bit more time, perhaps. But, I can’t.”

She was very careful about her tone of voice and what she tried to convey through her eyes, hoping he would understand what she really meant by it all. Opheus was completely focused on her, but with his brother listening too, she had to be extremely careful.

“The only thing I can do is give you more time with your father before he...before the Emperor passes. I do not want you to get injured or your father to be left to die alone.”

Opheus opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out, looking unsure and terribly confused, but Cassandra knew he would be smart enough to understand.

In their current situation, Cassandra couldn’t do anything for the Emperor. She was trapped with no medicine and no supplies. If she had any chance to bring something to help, she would have. She didn’t think the Emperor would have been imprisoned in Vrehan’s apartments or that he would be in such bad shape by the time she arrived. But she had to face reality, she couldn’t save him in their current situation, even if she did her best. If Lephys hadn’t shown up, she may have been able to buy some time, if only a little, but not now, not anymore.

Yet, there still might be hope. There was someone else in the Palace with knowledge similar to hers who could help. Lephys did not know that her younger sister was in the

Palace too, but Opheus did. If he could bring Missandra back here with some proper medicine once she and Lephys were gone, maybe they could buy some time.

Missandra was not as good with medicine, but she knew about poisons, and she had learned quite a bit from Cassandra over the last several weeks. It wasn't much, but it might be enough to save the Emperor, or at least win him some time - it was the one thing they needed the most right now.

Time. All the time they could possibly get, if they could just save the Emperor before his sons returned.

"What's the catch?" asked Lephys, squinting his eyes in suspicion.

"There is no catch, Your Highness," said Cassandra, turning to him. "You already know I am not a fighter. I won't resist. All I wish is for Prince Opheus and His Highness to be left alone. We already know the Emperor is condemned. I only want to give him a chance to die peacefully, and for Prince Opheus to leave here unscathed."

"What tells me my brother won't come and kill me as soon as I turn my back?"

Cassandra glanced towards Opheus, who was still glaring at his younger brother. She could understand why there was absolutely no trust between them. It was hard to believe they even shared a drop of blood.

"You have me as a hostage. His Highness won't risk hurting me and losing his chance to be left out of all of this. I...coerced him into helping me in the first place. He has nothing to gain in this."

Lephys looked doubtful. Opheus was indeed not a good fighter and he was the one Prince who probably didn't care much about either side winning over the other. He wasn't close to any of his brothers, but seeing that he had helped Cassandra was already troubling him. It confirmed that he cared enough about her.

The Fifth Prince hesitated. There had to be a catch somewhere. He didn't consider Kairen's favorite to be a cunning woman, but he couldn't process her sacrificing herself for his father and brother without getting anything in return. None of it made any sense, especially not Opheus helping her out in the first place.

"Why did you help this woman?" he asked his brother.

"Why indeed?" sighed Opheus, putting his hand on his neck as if to massage it. "Women are such mysterious creatures."

“Answer me!”

Opheus glared back.

“Don’t start ordering me around. I helped her because I wanted to. Satisfied?”

Lephys wasn’t buying it. He looked even more annoyed, his fingers fidgeting on his whip.

“You’re lying.”

“What do you know? Maybe Kairen and I have more in common than you think?”

“Don’t take me for a fool, I’m well aware of your tastes!”

Opheus scoffed, covering his mouth in a mocking expression and raising an eyebrow.

“You think you know me, Lephys? Do you really think I’m more like you than Kairen, perhaps? You idiot.”

Suddenly, Opheus turned to Cassandra and before she could make a move, he grabbed her chin between his fingers and kissed her. That action shocked her just as much as the Fifth Prince. She couldn’t react, her whole body froze. Opheus’ kiss was deep, using his tongue, and aggressively playing with her mouth. Watching the scene unfold, Lephys’s eyes were wide open and his jaw on the floor. Cassandra realized half-way through that this wasn’t just a little kiss and, coming back to her senses, she pushed the Prince away, blushing. She had never been kissed by another man before!

But this wasn’t her main concern. She was completely flustered by the kiss, barely realizing Opheus had grabbed her hand during the moment and put something between her fingers. Everything had happened so fast that she had to focus to hide it quickly.

“You’re disgusting,” said Lephys, still in shock.

“Oh, dear, you’re not going to tell us you’re a virgin, are you?” retorted Opheus with a smirk.

Lephys was not amused. He suddenly raised his whip and cracked it through the air. Though it may have seemed like a mere outburst of anger, the whipping actually left a large dent in the nearest wall. Cassandra couldn’t help but shudder. If he could cut that deep into wood with just a little whip, she didn’t want to imagine what damage he could inflict if he used that on a human body.

“Fine! I’m taking the woman with me, but don’t you dare attempt to move our father anywhere, Opheus. You won’t succeed. I have my guards and our brother’s men surrounding the Palace, no one can come in or out!”

That was more than disputable considering that Cassandra and Missandra had managed to walk in despite the security, but surely, the Emperor’s health wouldn’t allow them to move him anywhere anyway.

Lephys walked over, and though Opheus still had his weapon in hand, both brothers only glared at each other. It was like two beasts in a room, ready to jump at each other’s throat. If there had been even a shred of brotherly love between these two, it was definitely gone now. Cassandra stepped forward and placed herself between the two men, fiercely hoping her plan would work.

“You take care of yourself,” Opheus whispered to her as he held his glare on his younger brother.

“Thank you.”

Lephys brutally grabbed Cassandra’s wrist, pulling her to his side and away from Opheus.

“You better not go anywhere, Opheus.”

“And where would I go?” retorted his older brother, pissed.

Lephys made a sour face, but he had nothing to answer to that. Working with his whip once more, he wrapped it around Cassandra’s wrists, pulling them together tightly and trapping her. She grimaced as the fibers painfully cut through her skin a bit. Opheus saw it too, but did not say a thing.

“Fine,” hissed Lephys.

Finally breaking their staring contest, Lephys pulled Cassandra to leave the room with him. She glanced back once more at Opheus. Maybe she dreamt it, but she saw him nod very slightly with a determined expression. Had he understood her silent plea? Was he going to send someone for Missandra, find a way to have her come to help the Emperor? She could only hope so.

It was too late now. Lephys was dragging Cassandra away, walking confidently across Vrehan’s apartments. He was obviously in charge with his brother gone. None of the guards they crossed paths with said a thing, and the servants didn’t dare raise their



heads either. They knew, thought Cassandra. All the people working there were already obeying the Second and Fifth Princes, as if they were already in power.

Cassandra was utterly disgusted. The Emperor had probably taken years to establish himself as a force within his empire, working for years to keep it afloat, and yet the powerful man was overthrown so easily. Fear and envy were getting the best of all these people. They didn't care which Master they served, as long as they could keep their positions and money. She thought about Lephys' speech earlier, about his concubines. It was always the same. People killed and threw their lives away for greed.

"How did you get inside the Palace to begin with?" Lephys suddenly asked as they continued walking.

"I paid a servant to help me," she lied.

She deliberately made it sound like she had used someone she hadn't known before, so Lephys wouldn't try to find and kill the culprit. He wouldn't want to lose his time over simple corruption.

"Tsk...Those little rats cannot be trusted."

Cassandra didn't add anything else. Lephys wasn't Opheus. He would have no compassion for her, and the only reason she was alive at that moment was her relationship with Kairen.

She had to think of her next move. How was she going to get out of this situation, now? She had been captured so easily, it was almost laughable. She continued following Lephys. He didn't seem to fear that she might escape with his whip tightly binding her wrists. Cassandra tried to remain calm.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked. "To the cells?"

"Oh no, darling, that would be too obvious and boring. No...I have other plans for you."

He suddenly turned around to face her, grabbing Cassandra's throat in his hand. She almost choked, barely able to breathe as he tightened his grip. He had a dark, sadistic gleam in his eyes, something that reminded her of his vicious older brother.

"I don't often get the chance to make my annoying older brother suffer, but when the opportunity arrives, I will take it. I wonder what Kairen will do when he learns I had

my way with his precious woman? I've found you interesting from the day we met and, though I find you rather ugly, you will still be a nice toy for me to play with before they come back."

Cassandra's blood left her face. She could barely breathe with his fingers tight around her throat and all the blood draining from her face. Her limbs were tingling as she was fighting to stay conscious. Watching her, Lephys was enjoying her panicked state, his grip tightening as a vicious smirk spread across his lips. This time, he really did resemble Vrehan, with a crazy glint in his eyes. Cassandra tried to think, to grab his wrist, when he suddenly let go.

Cassandra fell to her knees, coughing and gasping for air. She could already see the bruises forming on her skin, but for now, she was focused on recovering as fast as she could. She had to stay alert.

"I don't trust Opheus enough to stay here," he said.

He grabbed her by her wrists, still tightly bound by his whip, and yanked her forward causing her to fall and hurt her shoulder. Cassandra grimaced as her mind flashed back to the day of the Celebrations when she had been similarly dragged across the Palace. This time though, she fought to get up before he could drag her any further. Lephys had just started walking without a care as to whether she was following or not, his whip was a leash that hauled her along. Painfully, Cassandra managed to find her balance and get back on her feet right away. With her hands so tightly tied, she had no choice but to follow him through the corridors.

She couldn't recognize where they were headed, but she didn't like that they were going deeper inside the Palace and further away from the Emperor. Cassandra prayed that the Fourth Brother would find a way to get Missandra to the Emperor, and somehow find a way to save the old man.

Lephys looked absolutely sure of himself as he walked through the corridors. Had his apartments always been this far? Cassandra was completely lost, but then, she suddenly recognized the area they were in.

The lake! They were close to the large garden, the one where the New Year Celebrations had been held only a few weeks prior. She recognized the corridor they were walking through, the same one that she and Kairen had isolated themselves in. The memory had her blushing slightly, in spite of the situation she was in. If only she could go back to those days, to Kairen's strong arms. However, she had more pressing matters to think about. The Emperor had tried to tell her something about the lake, what was it? She could now see it through the windows, but no matter how many

times she tried to glance at it, there was nothing special happening there. There weren't even any concubines chatting or taking their tea, or servants walking by! The Imperial Palace seemed strangely empty now.

Suddenly, two horn blows resonated throughout the Palace's walls. Lephys, still walking ahead of her, suddenly stopped and grimaced, turning his head.

"Damn it! That bastard is back sooner than I expected!"

"What? Who?" asked Cassandra, a cold shiver running down her spine.

"Vrehan! Anyway, let's do this quickly, before he gets here."

As he started dragging her faster, Cassandra's body shivered. The Second Prince was back already? What about Kairen then? How far away was he with the Imperial Army? If Vrehan was back now, he would go straight to the Emperor, perhaps even kill him right away! Opheus and Missandra were now in more danger than before!

While she panicked, Cassandra didn't realize that they had finally arrived at the Fifth Prince's apartments. Before she could fight back, he threw open the door to a bedroom, where two women were laying, both naked except for some very heavy jewelry around their necks, arms, and ankles. The Fifth Prince glared at them.

"Out!" he yelled.

Both women left hurriedly with looks of disappointment on their faces. Once they were gone, Lephys flicked his whip, throwing Cassandra on to the now vacant bed. Falling to her side, she moved her wrists immediately, desperately trying to free herself as she heard a chuckle.

"That's a bit too late, woman. Or do you think you can escape an Imperial Prince? A man with the Dragon Blood?"

Cassandra glared at him, not even bothering to answer. Lephys was not worthy of the Dragon Blood that flowed through his veins. He was just a horrible, disgusting monster that she was starting to hate even more than the Second Prince, if that was possible.

She kept wriggling her wrists, trying to loosen the knot despite the fibers cutting into her skin. It was painful, and she could feel her flesh being ripped apart, but she had no choice. She had to hurry before it was too late.

Before her, Lephys watched her struggle, visibly amused. A snicker on his face, he started undressing, taking off his outfit slowly. When he put one knee on the bed, Cassandra froze and glared at him.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed.

“Oh, I’m planning to do much more than touch you. I bet you’ll even like it. Women just can’t deny their pleasure. Those whores just want sex and, just like you, they like to refuse me just for the fun of it. You are all like that. You act like a prude and innocent, but you just want to be fucked by a strong man. Don’t pretend you’re all about my brother. Once I’m done with you, you’ll be begging me to keep you, they all do.”

“I’d rather die,” she retorted.

His words made her want to throw up. She didn’t care what his concubines felt about him, she was nothing but disgusted by him. This man was a monster, a sick pervert - she found it incredulous that he even shared some of the same blood as Kairen. But she was steady in her resolve, she wouldn’t let him touch her, not a chance in hell.

As he slowly moved towards her, she tried to retreat, wiggling her way back on the bed, trying to crawl away as far as she could. As her hands were still tied, she readied her free legs to kick him if he got too close. Lephys’ smile got even wider as she kept furiously glaring at him.

“I like them feisty. I can’t wait to tame you and show my brother that his little slut has become mine. Kairen thinks he is so much better than all of us. I can’t wait to see the look on his face once he learns I fucked his woman, his beloved witch.”

“You won’t touch me,” hissed Cassandra, furiously.

She was ready to fight with all she had. She had learned from Kairen. Never before had she had such a fiery, murderous look in her green eyes.

The Fifth Prince laughed and, with a quick movement from his hands, undid his whip from around her wrists. Cassandra looked at her free hands in shock, the red marks buried deep on her skin. Suddenly, the Prince moved closer and before she could even react, half of his body was above hers. She tried to kick him, but his hand reacted immediately, catching her ankle mid-air with a grin.

“You can’t escape me. Do you think you can even try to fight me? I am a Prince, and you’re nothing but a weak woman. You’d better learn to lie down and obey because I intend to have my way with you until Vrehan gets here.”

Cassandra wasn’t even listening anymore. She didn’t care what horrible plans he intended for her or how long it would take his brother to get there. None of this was going to happen. She struggled to turn around on her stomach, despite her ankle still trapped in his hand. She heard him laugh from behind her, but she was busy retrieving what she had hidden in her sleeve earlier.

“What are you doing, witch? You think that’s it? Oh, or is that an invitation to your...”

“I said don’t touch me!” Cassandra shouted.

Before the young Prince could react, she had turned around and sat up as her arm flew in his direction. This time, he was a second too late. With one hand holding himself up on the mattress and the other still occupied with her leg, he wasn’t quick enough to block Cassandra’s hand. His eye caught a glimpse of silver as he saw it coming, but he barely had a chance to comprehend the threat until a sharp pain pierced his neck.

The Fifth Prince let out a horrible screech as his blood splattered both of them, his eyes wide open in shock. Lephys suddenly let go of her ankle, his fingers shaking, as they came up to touch the weapon that had just stabbed him. He could feel the warm blood running down his neck, and the sharp piece of metal stuck there. He spasmed for several seconds, completely shaken by the waves of pain. His eyes were trained on Cassandra as she jumped out of the bed. It was clear he was having a hard time coming to terms with what had just happened. She was shivering in fear as she stepped away from him, but she had done it. Opheus’ long earring was embedded deep inside his flesh, planted there and not moving. She saw Lephys’ eyes following her moves as he gagged several times, trying to get words out.

“Y... You... witch...”

“I’m not a witch,” she retorted, out of breath. “I’m a physician!”

With those last words, Cassandra turned around and ran out of the bedroom as fast as she could. She knew she didn’t have a second to lose. She had aimed right for his carotid artery and stabbed as hard as she could, but she had no idea how fast he’d recover. She had seen Kairen heal some deep cuts in a matter of seconds, but she had never seen what his younger brother’s healing abilities were. If it was a normal man she had stabbed, he would have been dead in minutes, but she wasn’t so naive as to think the Fifth Prince would die from this though.

So, Cassandra kept running down the corridors, desperate to find her way back. The reality of what had just happened was hitting her slowly, but she didn't have time to stop and think. She had just tried to murder an Imperial Prince but, strangely enough, she had more pressing concerns right now. She was worried about the Emperor, Opheus, Missandra, and more importantly, she was terrified to face Vrehan or his sister, alone.

Cassandra wasn't familiar with this part of the Palace, and she was afraid to go the wrong way, or run into someone unfavorable. However, she needed to get back, and fast. As soon as Lephys recovered, he'd come after her and if he didn't, someone, like his concubines from before, would be quick to let the guards know the White Witch had assassinated the Fifth Prince!

Suddenly, she heard it. Footsteps, running behind her.

“Come back, you whore!”

A cold shiver ran down her spine. How could he be back on his feet and running already? Cassandra accelerated, but it was too much on her body for one day. The climbing had been easier than she thought, but sneaking by a window, riding a Dragon, fighting off a rapist Prince, and running through the Palace probably wasn't recommended for a woman who had given birth not ten days ago!

She was frantic. There was no sign of Kairen's return and with Vrehan back, he would soon know she was here. All she had managed to do was win a bit of time for the Emperor, but it may have all been for nothing.

Finally, Cassandra ran into a familiar corridor - the one with its windows open to the garden with the lake! At least she knew where she was now, but the furious footsteps were growing loud behind her. Tears grew in Cassandra's eyes. She wasn't going to make it. She knew the way back to where the Emperor was, but even if Opheus was still there, she wouldn't get there in time. The Fifth Prince was catching up to her, and from the sound of his steps compared to her speed, it would be all over in a couple of minutes.

Cassandra felt like breaking down. What had she even accomplished? She was either going to die or be captured again! She cried without stopping. Kassian, her baby, her little boy, she needed to see him, to hold him one last time. And Kairen - her man, her War God. She didn't want to die before getting to see him one last time, just one last time.

“You wench, stop!”

Cassandra heard a snap and then felt a sharp pain pierce her back. Lephys' whip. She felt like screaming out. He had cut her deeply! She stumbled forward, almost falling, but something kept her going. She managed to keep her feet steady and continued running.

She couldn't stop now, she couldn't give in. No matter what.

Suddenly, a loud horn resonated through the air. Cassandra heard Lephys' steps stop, and she couldn't help but glance behind her shoulder. The Prince had stopped running, his eyes wide open towards one of the windows.

"The Eastern Army?" he whispered.

Cassandra's heart jumped in her chest. Kairen's Army! They were in the Capital! She felt an incredible wave of adrenaline and her feet carried her before Lephys started chasing her again. She still had a chance! Just a slim chance. If the Eastern Army was here, then either Kairen or Shareen was too.

"Come back, you damn witch! I will kill you before his eyes!"

The voice behind her couldn't hold her back. Cassandra took a sharp turn, entering another corridor before she abruptly stopped.

At the end of the corridor stood Vrehan right in the middle of her way, glaring at her. Cassandra's lips trembled. She stepped back without thinking, despite the running that wasn't stopping behind her. For a second, she wondered if she was hallucinating, if she was having some daytime nightmare. It couldn't be. Not now, of all times. However, the Second Prince was standing still, in his military outfit, his eyes on her like a snake about to kill its prey. Her blood turned cold as she noticed the long sword by his side.

"Finally," he hissed. "We meet again, White Witch."

Cassandra felt like the ground was falling from under her feet. She was falling into some hellish nightmare that wouldn't end. Her mind went blank for a couple of seconds.

The Second Prince Vrehan was standing in front of her. The one man she loathed the most, the one person she had tried to avoid at all costs, and now...Cassandra tried hard to repress her fear. She couldn't give up now, not just because he had appeared. She had heard the horn, Kairen had to be close and with his army in tow. Now that she had stopped running, Cassandra could hear the noise outside. It was still far, because of

how vast the Imperial Palace was, but she could tell something was happening. Probably a war between the Eastern and the Imperial Armies, but whatever was going on outside, she silently prayed it was coming their way.

Vrehan was hearing it too. He frowned, looking at the window with a sour expression.

“Kairen, that bastard. He was fast.”

Just hearing his name gave Cassandra a new wave of strength. She took a deep breath, her eyes still on Vrehan as she thought about her next move. She couldn't stay here, Lephys would catch up at any second, and going forward was now out of the question. She glanced sideways. She had hoped to find a real exit earlier, but it seemed like she had no other choice but to climb out one of the windows.

“Oh, well... At least now I've got a valuable hostage,” Vrehan suddenly whispered, his eyes going back to her.

Cassandra took a step back as a reflex. She was not going to let him near her. She had made that mistake once, and the cost was Dahlia's life. She had learned her lesson.

Before he could add another word, Cassandra suddenly jumped to the side and did her best to climb out of the window as fast as she could. She heard him yell something incomprehensible behind her, but she had no time to wonder what it was. She was absolutely desperate and she couldn't stay in that corridor. Plus, the words of the Emperor had been circling in her mind the entire time. The lake. Did he mean this lake? Why this lake?

Cassandra's feet landed in the deep grass of the garden, and started running right away towards the lake. She knew she only had a few seconds at best before both brothers would catch her. She was running as fast as she could. She had no idea what was going to happen or if that lake could save her life, but she had no other option. Diving into the lake seemed like the craziest idea, but it was her last resort.

“Come back here!”

The Fifth Prince had just jumped out of the window too, but Cassandra was several meters ahead of him and had no intention of slowing down. The only thing that interested her right now was the lake, but something caught her attention as she was rushing towards it. On the ground were several shadows of lines crossing over each other. She raised her head to find where they were coming from. A grid!



That crazy Second Prince had laid out a grid of thick, long, silver chains running between the roofs, covering the open area. Was it meant to keep the dragons from entering there? She didn't remember seeing anything like this during her flight earlier with Opheus, but then again it would have been impossible for him to cover the whole Imperial Palace. Had he just laid these in the areas where he had hidden the Emperor? This was insane! It also explained Glahad's absence. Where had the Golden Dragon gone if he wasn't by his Master's side? Had he been trapped in some way?

Cassandra didn't have time to wonder any more, as she heard the crack of the whip dangerously close behind her. She accelerated despite the pain in her back and legs. The strain from all the running and climbing was starting to take its toll on her body, but she ignored it, only focusing on the lake, and running faster than the two princes.

“What are you doing!?”

She ignored them. Her feet were already in the water as she tried to scrutinize the surface of the lake. She walked in, but she couldn't see much. With the sunlight reflecting on the surface, it was too deep and too dark to see anything past a couple of meters beneath the surface. How deep was the lake? While singing her song those weeks ago she had stayed where she could just sit with the water at her waist. Now, she had to go as far as she could.

The familiar feeling of water enveloping her legs gave her some more strength and she tore the edges of her dress so she could walk and then swim more comfortably. The whip cracked again, just breaking the surface of the water next to her. He had just barely missed, but he was close enough to hit her.

“Don't kill her!” shouted Vrehan. “We need her alive!”

Ironically, the Second Prince may have saved her life. Lephys kept trying to get a hold of her, but the Prince apparently wasn't good at gauging his own strength. Either he was too heavy with it and violently slashed the water, or too light and he missed her completely. Cassandra kept going, half-swimming now. She knew the Dragon Princes wouldn't follow her into the water, but everything was going to depend on how long she could stay beneath the surface.

She took several deep breaths, and when her lungs felt full, she finally dove in. As she hurried deeper in the lake, she heard the echo of the whip breaking the surface above her. Cassandra needed to get far enough away so they couldn't reach her.

She had no idea where she was going. It took her eyes a long minute to adjust to the water before she was finally able to see clearly. As she had suspected, it was indeed

significantly deeper than it looked from the surface. She couldn't tell how much exactly, but she kept going deeper. As she dove, Cassandra couldn't help but silently pray the air she had stored would last as long as she needed. As she swam past various fish, she thought how eerie it was - being submerged in this underwater world with everything going on above. It was likely no one from the Imperial Family had ever bothered to try swimming in the lake as none of the fish looked bothered by her presence, like she posed no real threat.

Cassandra kept going deeper. Her composition was different from the Dragon Empire's people. Her legs could paddle for a long time without becoming too tired, and her eyes weren't troubled by the water. Her body could handle the pressure, and her lungs could retain air for a long time.

Hence, she continued past what any other person around could withstand. What had the Emperor hoped she would find in that lake? Was this even the right lake he had mentioned? It was too late to wonder and worry about it now. As she got farther away from the surface, she was soon surrounded by darkness. As she soon realized, the light wasn't the only thing that was slowly disappearing. There were less and less fish too. Why? She would have thought all those underwater creatures would enjoy the calmness in the lower levels of the lake, but instead, all the little fish stayed closer to the surface, as if they were too scared to go further and the few that dared venture lower didn't stay long, quickly turning around. Cassandra hesitated. Should she still go down after witnessing that? What were the depths of the lake hiding.

She glanced upwards. It felt strangely calm down here compared to what was waiting for her on the surface, though she had no choice anyway. The danger was surely much more grave up there.

The young concubine kept going down, her eyes now struggling to see anything. She had a strange feeling. As if something was looking at her, lurking in the darkness. Something dangerous.

Cassandra was starting to feel a little unwell. The air in her lungs was slowly running out, and she was becoming tired. Her body was resenting all the vigorous exercise from the day, and the water pressure was compounding her discomfort. She couldn't give-up yet. She had to spend as much time as she could searching underwater and, even if she couldn't find anything down there, she needed to delay her return to the surface as long as possible.

Suddenly, something quickly swam past her. She froze. It was big. Very big. It had what seemed like a long body, something much longer than any underwater creature she had ever heard of. A giant snake, maybe?

Fear was starting to claw at the back of her mind, and not being able to see anything was making it even more terrifying. If a beast did decide to attack her, she was completely defenseless. She had left Opheus' earring in his brother's neck to delay his healing process, and she had given her dagger to Missandra before they left for the Palace. As her younger sister was a better fighter, she was the better choice to hold the weapon, in case they found themselves in such a situation, but she hadn't even thought of taking it back when they parted ways. Though she probably wouldn't have anyway, she was now regretting that. She had nothing to defend herself with.

The creature moved next to her again, and a loud sound resonated like an echo in the water. Cassandra's eyes grew larger. Was that...a growl? It was higher-pitched than a dragon's, but it was still so similar to Krai's! It couldn't be, could it? Suddenly, the strange growl echoed out again as she turned towards its origin, squinting her eyes to try and locate the creature's exact position. If it could see her, why hadn't it attacked yet? Was that thing what the fish were afraid of? Cassandra focused on the water's movements around her, trying to figure out where the creature would swim to next. It ought to be massive judging by the growl it made. A crazy theory was growing in the back of her mind, but it seemed absolutely impossible.

Two big white lights suddenly appeared in the darkness. Cassandra had to cover her mouth so as not to scream and lose more of her precious air. The lights were big, like diamonds, and they were... eyes. A pair of reptilian eyes. The two eyes grew closer, and Cassandra tried to swim away by reflex. Judging from the size of them, whatever creature they belonged to had to be enormous! If that thing decided it wanted to hunt her, she was already dead.

However, the eyes didn't appear menacing. In fact, as they slowly grew closer, there was no animosity in them at all. Cassandra froze, though her heart was beating like crazy. What was that thing? She decided to stop and let it approach. She couldn't go far or fast enough to flee it anyway. If she was going to die, better make it quick.

A giant snout gradually appeared below the white eyes. It was covered in scales and Cassandra thought they might be dark grey, but they really could have been any color. In this darkness, she couldn't tell. A large snout protruded out and sniffed her, the creature's head slowly coming into view as it continued approaching her. Cassandra was speechless! It was impossible, but she couldn't make this up - it was definitely a dragon's head.

The head was a bit leaner than any dragon she had seen, and there were no little horns on the side of its face or on its head, only two long ones, cascading back down from the top of its head, though one of them was broken. The cheeks were a bit rounder too,

and Cassandra noticed the wide and long holes along the neck as the creature turned its head slightly. Could those be gills?

The creature circled around her, clearly assessing her. Cassandra wondered if she could even call it a dragon, but regardless, she was fascinated by the creature. The face was clearly that of a dragon, but its body was different from those she knew. It was leaner, with shorter limbs and, more importantly, the joints of those limbs had large fans. The creature was slithering its body slowly and meticulously to move itself. Cassandra was amazed. From what she observed of them, those had to be like fins. There were several on its back too, and the tail of the dragon had a similar shape, as well. This seemed so impossible, she wondered if she hadn't lost consciousness already and was perhaps hallucinating it all. But, the creature next to her was very real. It kept swimming in circles around her, never taking its eyes off her and growled again. Cassandra wondered if this was it. If she was going to be killed by such an unbelievable creature. Was this what the King wanted her to find?

Cassandra didn't have much air left in her lungs. She was slowly suffocating and her head was starting to spin a bit. She glanced towards the surface. What should she do? It was already a miracle that this dragon-like being hadn't attacked her by now! Such a magnificent creature...

Cassandra had no more oxygen left, she opened her mouth slightly, feeling too tired to fight anymore. The creature slowly swam closer to her, and she somehow managed some strength to extend her arm. The dragon, if it even was one, slid past her, letting her fingers slide across its skin. It was incredibly cold.. contrary to Krai's warmth. Cassandra chuckled, her brain finding that information funny.

She couldn't hold on anymore. She wanted to close her eyes. One last growl resonated through the waters before she lost consciousness.