

Chapter 9

When Cassandra felt she had stayed in their sight for long enough, she took her basket back and left without adding a word. Ignoring all the stares on her, she only went a bit further away, into another garden, with a wider sample of vegetation and an artificial lake and fountain. There, she dipped her bare feet in the shallow water, humming calmly.

Her plan was so simple, yet she wondered if it'd work. Most of the concubines had watched when she washed her hands and saw the blue marks that wouldn't go away. Of course, it was on purpose. Cassandra had washed laundry countless times before. She knew what colorants were the hardest to wash away, especially without any kind of soap. If she wanted, she could have gotten rid of it, but this was all part of her plan.

First, have the concubines and Princesses believe her story. Even if they didn't believe her at first, the odd blue colour she couldn't seem to wash off her fingers and nails should have planted a seed of doubt in their minds. That was all she needed. Just a little bit of doubt, ignorance mixed with a bit of fear, and time for it to grow inside a narrow mind.

As she rested on her own by the lake, she was surprised to see three young women come to her side. She frowned a bit. Those women seemed to be sneering between themselves while glancing her way. Two of them had a red dress and only the one walking ahead had a pink one. She had seen those women before. All of them were among the Fifth Prince's concubines. How many did he have exactly?

“Concubine Cassandra, do you mind if we accompany you for a bit?”

Cassandra shook her head. Since those women were on the same level as her, she didn't have to show any extra politeness, but she shouldn't be too rude either. Kareen had already scolded her many times for acting too submissive when she didn't need to, and Cassandra was diligently trying to apply her advice even more now that she was accounted for as a high-ranked concubine.

“We were worried you'd feel unwelcome over there, with such a crowd. It must be suffocating to face so many women at the same time,” said the one in a pink dress.

“It's fine,” simply replied Cassandra.

She was wary of those women. She had no idea why they would want anything to do with her, the newly brought concubine. If it was merely out of curiosity, it would be fine. All three of them sat within a reasonable distance of her but, judging from the places they took, it was obvious the one with a pink dress was the leader of the trio.

“It is such a blessing to finally see a Concubine to the Third Prince. His Highness must be delighted to have you.”

Cassandra couldn't help but wonder if her pregnancy was known to everyone yet. Unlike some of the other women, she wasn't exposing her baby bump. Back in the previous garden, some of the concubines were so proud of their pregnancies, they were showing off their big bellies. On the contrary, Cassandra wasn't exposing as much skin. Her dress was fully covering her stomach, protecting it from the sun and obvious stares. Not all the concubines had been there at the feast last night, but Cassandra knew the chances were high that the news of her bearing the War God's child had probably spread already.

“Thanks.”

She didn't want to get too friendly with other concubines. None of them could have been there by mistake. You couldn't stay a Prince's concubine, residing in the Imperial Palace, if you couldn't take care of yourself first. No woman in this place was as innocent as they looked.

For a few minutes, the three women pretended to talk between themselves, about trivial matters such as the weather and their Prince's latest concerns, but Cassandra knew they were observing her. She pretended not to know and soaked her feet, ignoring them.

“Lady Cassandra, what do you think of this?”

Wondering what topic they had finally decided to share with her, she turned her head to them. The woman in a pink dress had a cunning smile Cassandra didn't like.

“My servant made a mistake this morning. I thought I should punish her, but my friends thought I should be nice to her and let it go. She has been a very nice servant of mine for a while but...recently, I've been thinking she's acting too much in front of my dearest Prince. I think maybe the little swine is trying to seduce one's Prince. What do you think?”

Cassandra frowned a bit. It may have seemed like a trivial matter, but her words were heavier than they seemed. Was she hinting at how a servant or a slave, like Cassandra, had dared to seduce a Prince? She obviously had no idea. Cassandra sighed.

“I wonder why you should punish her. Isn’t The Fifth Prince the one to have many concubines? If he can split his love so easily, you should be used to His Highness welcoming one more every once in a while, right?”

The concubine’s expression turned sour.

Cassandra was clear, though. She wouldn’t let this woman imply they were in the same situation or that Cassandra had stolen anyone’s property. She couldn’t compare her Prince with his womanizer of a brother. Basically anyone could become the Fifth Prince’s concubine, with a good body and some sense of seduction. No wonder those women were jealous to death and eager to start fights at any given occasion.

“At least she isn’t some slave,” said one of those in a red dress, pretending to talk to her peer.

“It has to be difficult, you know. We should even pity her,” said the other one. “I mean, the Imperial Family can be so wilful. If it’s only a slave or a servant, they can be wiped out without blinking and no one will even remember them.”

Cassandra ignored them, a bit annoyed. Were all concubines so petty? So childish? Did they think they could toy with her? She wasn’t a slave anymore, so why would she listen to this nonsense? Seeing Cassandra wasn’t flinching, the concubine in the pink dress clicked her tongue. She thought she had found easy prey, but this wasn’t as fun as she had thought.

“You know, it’s been done before. Servants taken as concubines and forgotten the next day. Sent to feed the dragons.”

“Really?” said Cassandra, her voice remaining very calm.

Her experience as “dragon food” probably was not the one they had imagined at all. Actually, Cassandra smiled, remembering her first encounter with both Kairen and his dragon. Seeing her like this, the concubine became red, annoyed at her passive response. Wasn’t this bitch going to worry at all! The War God wasn’t anywhere in sight, so how could she keep acting so mighty! She wasn’t even that pretty!

“Well, slaves are meant to be tough after all.”

Once again, Cassandra ignored her. She couldn't be affected by such a petty attitude. Actually, she thought this concubine was acting like an annoying flea, trying to bother her with baseless sentences and a mighty attitude.

She couldn't be bothered by that, or she wouldn't be able to withstand one more day here. After dipping her toes in the freshwater some more, turning a blind ear to their nonsense, Cassandra stood up, brushing her hair a bit. To her surprise, the concubine stood up too and stepped closer.

“Now that I see you up close...”

Cassandra did not like this woman being so close. Aside from her Prince and his family, she hadn't gotten used to anyone being so close. She took a step back and the concubine in pink smiled, mistakenly thinking she was afraid.

“If...one was to disappear...mysteriously...I wonder how long it would take one to worry?”

Was this woman an idiot? Or did she think Cassandra was that weak? To be scared by such a childish threat? Cassandra had learned to be afraid of the Imperial Family. Whether it was a Princess or a Prince, she would have definitely been scared. But a concubine was only a woman, like her.

“Are you threatening me?” she asked.

Her calm but cold voice was sending a warning. Only the two women in the red dresses understood and carefully stepped back, looking pale and worried. Truth was, Cassandra herself wasn't scary at all, but her calm and confidence in this situation was something their instincts couldn't underestimate.

Unfortunately, the other Concubine missed that warning, smiling like a cat once again. It was as if she had found an easy prey to toy with, and would play until she had enough. Only, Cassandra wasn't in the mood to be playing at all.

“Why would I threaten you, Lady Cassandra? We are both concubines, after all. It would be a shame if anything happened...by accident.”

Cassandra hated that word. No accident ever happened in the Imperial Palace. As the other woman kept stepping forward, she kept retreating, closer and closer to the pond, until her heels were touching the water.

“Do you think...I'm scared?”

Cassandra's sudden question, said in a clear voice, finally managed to make her doubt. She frowned. She had been retreating all this time, wasn't she scared?

"Step back," ordered Cassandra.

Her soft and gentle voice didn't match her words. Hence, the concubine didn't move and chuckled.

"Don't you give me orders. You may wear a pink dress, but you're still under me. As any slave. You're under anyone here. Don't think this color will..."

"Step back."

As she said this for the second time, the concubine frowned, annoyed. Who was this bitch to give her orders?! She had been a concubine for over five years here! She wouldn't listen to the orders of a mere...

Before she could add another word, a sudden flap of wings was heard, and she retreated in a hurry. She barely had time to move before a giant claw ripped the grass she had stood on a couple of seconds ago.

If the concubine had been a bit more aware of her surroundings earlier, she would have seen the dark shape that had been growing bigger in the sky, coming their way at a scary speed. Cassandra had seen it coming from far away. Had the dragon gone hunting before looking for her?

Krai growled, wrapping its large body around Cassandra, putting its head right where her hand was, as she gently patted and scratched the dark scales. The dragon was happily growling, glad to be reunited with her, but to the three terrorized women, those sounds were horrifying. Moreover, the woman who stood unaffected at the center of those mountains of scales was still staring at them, completely fearless.

"You got interrupted. Please continue."

"I... I..."

Before she could gather her thoughts, Krai's large tail whipped in the pond, splashing them. All three women got drenched, and yet, they didn't even dare scream.

They tried to retreat, but to their surprise, Cassandra smiled softly.

"I believe you weren't done talking. Please stay."

For the first time, they realized how scary this woman was. Because she could utter those words with the softest voice, the gentlest smile, while a murderous beast was standing right next to her.

Cassandra hadn't really planned on cornering them, but Krai had come at the right time, and in a few minutes, she had decided she shouldn't let such women make easy prey of her. They would be an example, to show others she was no toy to play with. Like Kareen had told her, it would be better to teach them she wasn't going to be someone to take lightly. She would have her hands full dealing with the worst people already.

She had no spare time for the childish games of bored concubines.

After that episode, no other concubine dared to bother Cassandra for the next few days. It was made known within a few hours how scary the gentle-looking woman could be. She had kept all three women alone with her, making them cry, beg, and tremble in fear of being devoured at any given moment, for over an hour. Cassandra had only insisted they told the same stories over and over, but all three concubines didn't dare disobey and anger her or the beast. It could have seemed like a short time, but anyone who had ever been in the presence of one of the Imperial Dragons knew it wasn't.

Truth was, Cassandra had only intended to scare them a bit, and only caressed or scratched Krai during that time, but it had worked beyond wonders. It so happened that the Black Dragon still had fresh blood on its maw, and the concubines saw those ruby eyes shine their way in a scary manner for longer than they could endure. Even if she would never give the order to bite or injure, unless she was in a death-threat situation, that sight was engraved in those women's minds. They had cried for hours after that to anyone who would listen, about how merciless the War God's concubine was, threatening to have the Dragon eat their poor defenseless selves.

After that, even if most concubines still held some doubt about how things really went, the fact that she was often followed by the Black Dragon was enough of a warning, and when Krai wasn't in sight, most feared the beast wasn't too far away.

It was actually a bit of a funny sight.

Krai kept following her like a dog, growling to get her attention, glaring at anyone who came close, and growled even more when she walked inside a building its large body couldn't follow her into. It actually caused a bit of worry to the servants that the Palace's architecture wouldn't be able to withstand the beast's reckless climbing on the roofs to follow her scent.

Cassandra was doing her best to get used to the Imperial Palace, though it was difficult.

Firstly, that place was way too big for her to get used to. She got lost many, many times and would only realize once she asked someone how far she had drifted away from her initial destination.

Secondly, she wasn't with Kairen as often as she had hoped to be. The Emperor called for his son almost every day at dawn, and she helplessly spent breakfast and lunch alone, with the Imperial Concubine Mother, or in the Concubine's gardens, only to be reunited with him right before dinner with all of the Imperial Family.

Lastly, this daily buffet was a torture for her. She hated being confined in a room full of people who glared at each other, no matter how vast that room was. Since she had demonstrated she had the backing of an Imperial Dragon, and when Kairen was in the room, no one dared to defy her too much, but she still hated that atmosphere. The only good part of it was that they would listen together to minister reports and news about what was going on in the country, and after a few days, Cassandra realized those dinners were also a way for the Emperor to test his sons.

While the youngest brothers were usually fooling around with their concubines, enjoying the shows, and were annoyed by those topics, the three oldest Princes were deeply involved.

The oldest Prince, Sephir, was an obvious bookworm and knew every topic by heart. At first, to Cassandra, he seemed to be the smartest of them all. However, after a while, she realized his decision-making was mostly based on past occurrences, and if no similar situations had happened in the past, he was usually at a loss.

The only one who truly rivaled Kairen was the Second Prince, Vrehan. Cassandra didn't like him. He had a face like a rat, tiny eyes, and a mean expression. More importantly, he glared at Kairen anytime he would say anything and seemed like he was about to explode if their father agreed with him. Plus, his sister Phetra supported anything he said unconditionally. Since their last meeting, Cassandra had managed to avoid that woman, but Phetra made sure to glare her way any chance she could over dinner.

“What do you think, White Lily?”

Cassandra was surprised to hear the Emperor suddenly ask her opinion. This nickname he had given her had become sort of a title for her, whenever he addressed her, like she was some precious treasure.

It was the first time he openly asked for her opinion on a matter. Until then, Cassandra had listened and whispered some of her ideas a couple of times to Kairen, but she had never dared to interact with the Imperial Family Members while they had their talks. Also, it didn't seem like any other concubine was ever involved in those talks, as only the Princes and, more seldomly, the Princesses answered. She couldn't hide her surprise, but Kairen soon caressed her back, spreading his warmth to her and making her feel a bit more confident. This topic was about some medical issue she knew about, an epidemic that had risen in the South.

"I support the confinement idea, Your Highness. Until the real cause is found, nothing should leave or enter that village."

"Shouldn't we simply kill all the infected?" hissed Phetra, annoyed that Cassandra was even asked after she had given her own solution.

"Nothing in the reports proves this disease is transmitted by the sick," calmly replied Cassandra. "It could be the food, the water, even the animals. Sending a doctor with medical knowledge, enough drugs to heal those in need, and guarding the area closely, may be enough to prevent the disease from spreading, especially in such a remote place."

The Emperor nodded, looking satisfied.

"As expected of the Imperial Physician! Let's do this! Did you record all that she said?"

While he was checking in with his secretary, Cassandra turned to Kairen, who gently kissed her temple. Those few days, she had been spending a lot of time with some of the other Imperial Physicians present in the Palace, but for now, they had been learning more from her than she had learned from them. Some of Cassandra's knowledge of herbal medicine was revolutionary to them, and despite their annoyance at a female being acknowledged as a doctor at the beginning, the Imperial Physicians had started opening up to her, one by one, teaching her their ways and discussing their knowledge.

Hence, the Emperor knew she was doing well in that aspect and considered Cassandra's opinion.

"Also, make sure to check around, see if it hasn't spread. Now, to the military--"

Before the Emperor ended his sentence, the First Prince suddenly started coughing loudly, unable to stop. His concubines tried to help him, but he needed a few more minutes to catch his breath.

This wasn't the first time. Cassandra had seen Prince Sephir with this kind of issue several times before. Though she had considered a poison, from his pale look and thin figure, she guessed the First Prince had never been healthy to begin with. Probably weak lungs or some respiratory disease. Unfortunately, she couldn't approach another Prince and had to leave it to the Imperial Physician appointed for him. However, as the days went on, she couldn't help but fear for the eldest brother. This man wouldn't live long.

Once Sephir caught his breath and reassured everyone, the Emperor threw the remaining topics away, along with his secretary, and called for more wine. Cassandra, however, was concerned. How would the death of one of the brothers change things?

They only had two days left until the New Year's first celebrations. Once the week-long festivities were over, her Prince had promised to bring her back to the Onyx Castle, at least for the later stages of her pregnancy. Cassandra didn't want to stay in the Imperial Palace longer than necessary. She loathed this place.

"Are you tired?" he whispered in her ear.

"I'm fine..."

"Eat more."

She nodded and took some of the grapefruit he was handing her. She had been craving those lately and emptied almost all the plates of grapefruit at each banquet by herself. Was it because of her baby? Cassandra found herself with some new crazy craving each day. Tonight, it was white fish. The cooks had worked hard to make some more ready for her, and she was enjoying it slowly.

Cassandra wasn't the only pregnant concubine, as two of the Fifth Prince's women and one of the Second Prince's concubines were showing off their round bellies, but she was the only one to be shown so much care. She didn't know if Kairen or the Emperor had given special orders, but the servants seemed particularly careful while serving her and, more surprising, her food was tested before she ate anything.

"Father, how grand will the new year celebrations be this year?" asked one of the Princesses.

“The usual, the usual, Daughter of mine. We invited some neighboring countries, but not too many, and we will reopen the Arena!”

While exclamations rose all around the room, Cassandra got a chill. The Arena.

Memories of a bloody slaughter came back to her mind. Despite her meeting with the Prince, she could never forget that horrid scene, the dragons going after the humans and playing with their corpses. If it wasn't for Krai, she probably wouldn't have survived it either.

Feeling her shiver a bit, Kairen caressed her back. Cassandra usually warmed up from his touch, but this time, her expression was sad and his concubine was obviously lost in some dark thoughts. He frowned.

“Cassandra?”

She shook her head, unwilling to speak.

“Father, can we get fireworks?” asked one of the young Princesses.

“Tigers! I want to see wildcats!”

“And more chariot races! And dancers!”

As the Imperial Princesses started making more and more demands, Shareen, who had been silent on the seat next to Kairen, clicked her tongue.

“Are you going to pay for all this, Sisters? Did you suddenly start working and earning enough to cover your childish, petty whims?”

Her voice had the effect of a whip on them. Cassandra had never noticed, but Shareen was one of the oldest princesses around, and no one really dared to mess with her. Was it because of her being the War God's sister? Or her mother?

However, none of the Princesses dared to talk back to her, all looking down like children caught misbehaving. The Emperor laughed.

“Wise as ever, my Daughter! Well, it is true we won't spend too much this year; we've had a dry year, after all. Let's learn to restrain ourselves a bit, shall we? Fireworks and wildcats are fine, but we'll forget about chariot races. It's only good for spreading dust all around anyway and I'm getting bored seeing the same people every year. Forget it!”

“Father, what about the dragons’ sacrifice?”

Everyone in the room immediately went silent and Cassandra frowned. Of course, Phetra had been the one to suggest that, while looking at Cassandra, too. She knew exactly what she was doing, bringing that back up. The Emperor frowned.

“Phetra, we don’t make human sacrifices on the New Year!”

“I want to see it, Father. I missed the last show.”

Phetra’s voice was full of confidence and she was smiling like a snake. Cassandra stood up and, not waiting for the Emperor’s answer, walked away. She couldn’t speak against an Imperial Princess, but she could show her disagreement. She left the Imperial Banquet without looking back, shivering and angry.

Cassandra walked a few more steps, wondering where to go. She was angry and had no other way to protest than to leave the Imperial Banquet, which upset her. For once, Cassandra felt she was truly too powerless, unable to stop Phetra or oppose the Imperial Princess. This place was really too harsh.

“Imperial Concubine?”

She turned around, realizing someone had followed her. It only took her a couple of seconds to remember the young woman. Weeks and weeks ago, she was the young servant that had given her the first red dress.

“You’re...Dahlia, right?”

The young woman smiled.

“I’m glad you remember me, my Lady.”

“Please don’t... Just call me Cassandra, please.”

Dahlia chuckled. She hadn’t changed much since Cassandra had seen her. She was still wearing a long green dress, with her dark hair in a braided bun. Bowing slightly, she walked up a bit closer to her.

“Are you alright?”

“I...I needed some fresh air,” said Cassandra.

It was partially the truth. She felt stuffed, confined in that room with so many people. Only because her Prince was there could she bear it. Dahlia seemed to understand and nodded slightly.

“Do you want to rest in the Ivy Garden?”

“The Ivy Garden?”

“It’s a smaller one, not many people use it,” explained Dahlia with a smile. “But it’s really pretty at night.”

Cassandra nodded and followed her. Dahlia seemed to know her way around the Palace perfectly, even as the sun was slowly setting outside, putting them in the dark before long. After a few minutes, they finally arrived.

As she had said, it was a much smaller one than the fancy garden the concubines usually used, but Cassandra instantly loved it. It only had one bench and a little pond with white fish. The walls around it were covered in ivy and little white flowers she had never seen before. The place seemed incredibly pure and pretty.

While Cassandra walked around, Dahlia lit up a few lanterns, bringing some more light into the space.

The concubine was still observing the place when a long growl was heard. Krai’s head popped from behind one of the walls, those big red eyes finding her immediately.

“Come,” called Cassandra.

It only took one word. Stepping over the wall, Krai hurried to her side, circling her with its body, head resting next to her. Of course, it was the perfect position for being scratched, and the dragon growled until Cassandra sat and started taking care of its favorite spot.

Dahlia’s mouth was open in awe and she didn’t dare to step closer. The concubine was sitting right next to the dragon, totally fine, and scratching those scales as if it was just a huge dog! Though she was a brave girl, and the dragon seemed harmless this way, Dahlia sat a few meters away, close to the pond, but remained fascinated by the scene.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” said Cassandra after a few minutes. “I needed to relax a bit.”

“It’s my pleasure, Lady Cassandra. Is it really fine not telling anyone where you are, though? I thought you would have a few servants with you.”

Cassandra shook her head.

“It’s fine.”

As long as Krai was with her, its Master would know and be at ease. That was all Cassandra needed. Kairen had let her leave, but he probably had to stay behind to discuss official matters with his Father. As inexperienced as she was in politics, she understood that much. She also appreciated spending time alone with another woman her age. She missed Nebora a bit, and maybe because of their similar black hair, Dahlia reminded Cassandra of her friend somehow.

“How long have you been working here?” asked Cassandra.

“My whole life or so, I think... One of the Palace’s cooks found me on his doorstep and adopted me when I was just a baby. So, I became a servant as soon as I was old enough to be.”

Cassandra nodded. Dahlia was among the lucky ones. Most orphans were captured and made slaves. No wonder she knew the Palace so well, despite its size.

“Lady Cassandra, did you go to the Onyx Castle?” suddenly asked Dahlia, blushing slightly, but curious.

Cassandra smiled, and just like that, both women started talking. On one side, Dahlia was loving stories from outside the Palace, while Cassandra was keen to know any detail of this place that Dahlia could tell her.

Having grown up here, Dahlia had seen many, many concubines. That’s why she had felt Cassandra was different from the start. She didn’t have that mighty attitude of a noble’s daughter, or felt entitled in any way. She even spoke to her like an equal.

“Do you want to explore the world, Dahlia?”

The young woman seemed to hesitate for a while, blushing slightly.

“Yes, but...there is also someone I want to stay close to here. So...as long as that person is here, I don’t think I’ll be able to leave.”

“A lover?” asked Cassandra, judging from her reaction.

Dahlia sighed.

“I wish, but...I doubt they even know I exist, so...”

Cassandra felt a bit sorry for Dahlia. She seemed like such a gentle woman, but to fall in love in the Palace was... a sad twist of fate. With so many pretty concubines everywhere, it was probably hard to be noticed by anyone around here.

Cassandra knew how lucky she was that Kairen didn't actually care about such things. If it wasn't for Krai, she would have been nothing but dust by now. Thinking about this, she kept caressing the sleek scales for a while, chatting with Dahlia, actually feeling calmer than she had been in a while.

Much later in the night, the young woman was called back to work, and Cassandra was left alone in the garden. She didn't feel like going back, unsure if the banquet would be over by then, and so she decided to stay a bit longer.

The quiet garden was actually nice. At night, the temperature was much better for Cassandra to endure, with a fresh wind and the warm dragon scales on her back. She rested, watching the stars, until she heard someone step closer.

The Prince slowly walked to her side, putting one knee down.

“So, this is where you were.”

Cassandra smiled.

“His Highness, your Father, didn't...”

“He was unhappy you left.”

The concubine felt a bit happy about that. It meant he approved of her action, in a way. If he had been against her leaving, she couldn't even have taken one step out of the Banquet Hall. If the Emperor was unhappy, it probably wasn't directed at her, but at the one who had caused her to leave.

Cassandra felt a weight lifted off her shoulders. She wasn't used to being so bold, and every action made her insecure. She could still be killed at any moment, even if she was now wearing a pink dress. Kairen's presence helped her forget about her worries too.

“I like this garden,” she said softly.

“You want to stay here?”

Since Cassandra hesitated for a while, he decided to sit next to her, letting her lay against his chest. Surrounded by the Black Dragon, they knew no one would dare to bother them. Resting her head on his shoulder, Cassandra kept staring at the stars, feeling his warm hand caressing her.

“My mom used to tell me about the stars every night. She’d teach me how to read them, their names and their past.”

“Their past?”

Cassandra slightly nodded.

“In the tribe I grew up in, we did not believe in dragons and demi-Gods, but in the sacred nature. I was taught that every life is sacred and equally precious. Plants, animals, humans, all equal and living together, each one with a purpose. And the Elders said the stars are little reminders of each life that came and went. My mother said the brighter they were, the purer and shorter a life was.”

The Prince frowned a bit. It was so rare for her to talk about her life before meeting him. No wonder she wasn’t really afraid of Krai, and couldn’t stand another’s suffering.

“Did they teach you about medicine?”

“Yes... My Grandfather was the village chief and a good doctor. He knew every plant, every flower, every herb’s name, and their properties. He taught me everything. After that, I kept trying to learn what I could when I could access my master’s libraries or listen to the apothecary shop owners.”

Still, it was impressive. She was captured when she was very young, but had still managed to learn so much in such a short time and kept nurturing her talent by herself. Kairen felt like his woman was more precious than any treasure one could gather in this Palace. He caressed her hair, kissing her fingers gently.

“Your mother...” whispered Cassandra.

“What about her?”

“...Can you tell me what she did to the Second Prince’s mother?”

She heard him sigh.

“Their mother tried to poison me when I was young. She hated my mother and didn’t want her son to have another rival born from her. But my mother found out and tricked her into drinking it herself. She had a slow and painful death.”

Cassandra felt disgusted. How could one do such a thing to a child. Since Imperial Children were so resistant; drinking a poison meant for Kairen must have caused that concubine to be in terrible agony? No matter what, Cassandra couldn’t help but think it was a tragic death, even if she had brought it upon herself. Kareen wasn’t cruel by nature, but she certainly had to stand up to protect her children.

In the same situation, Cassandra wondered if she would have had the guts to do the same thing and cause someone else’s death. She put a hand on her tummy. Yes, maybe. Probably. She already loved her unborn child so much, she couldn’t bear the thought of losing him. If she had gone through what Kareen went through, losing several children, she might have gone crazy with despair. She shivered and hugged Kairen closer, in need of his warmth.

“Are you cold?”

“Just hug me, please.”

He gently obeyed, surrounding her with his sturdy arms and hot skin. Behind them, Krai softly growled, curling up a bit more around them. They stayed like this a long while until Cassandra fell asleep, and the Prince decided it was getting a bit too cold for his expecting concubine to stay out.

He gently carried her back to their bedroom, only noticing she was awake when laying her on the bed.

No words were exchanged between them for a while. He helped her get rid of her jewelry and dress then laid next to her. Cassandra’s emerald eyes were shining with the candlelight between them, as she kept staring at the War God, half-asleep.

“My Prince,” she whispered.

Her voice was so soft, he thought he had misheard it.

“My name,” he said, getting closer to her, placing one arm around her.

“Kairen... I love you.”

The War God remained stunned for a while, unable to say a word. Cassandra chuckled, observing his baffled expression for the first time. Did he really not know? She got a bit closer and put a quick peck on his lips, despite her shyness. Her heart was filled with something warm and sweet, and that secure feeling whenever that man was close.

Kairen didn't stay frozen for long though. The Prince's eyes dropped down to her lips and drew her in for a much more intense, deep kiss. Cassandra helplessly blushed, feeling his lips and tongue claiming her so fiercely. His caresses on her skin were still gentle, but it had a slightly different feel to it.

When they separated, Cassandra couldn't help but smile, a bit out of breath.

"Aren't you going to answer me?" she whispered gently.

Kairen stayed silent, scrutinizing her very seriously. After a while, he took a deep breath, looking stern.

"Marry me, Cassandra."

The young concubine was taken back in surprise, expecting anything but those words. It took her a few seconds to understand what he had just said. To marry him? Her? She was just...and already...her thoughts got lost in a storm. After a few seconds, she laughed nervously.

"Did you just..."

The War God's expression was still just as serious. Cassandra tried to sit up, but he held her wrists in place to keep her lying down.

"You don't want to?" he asked.

The young concubine sighed.

"If you marry me, you won't be able to change your mind."

"I know."

"Even if you meet someone much prettier and younger later," she added.

"I know."

What was he thinking?

Cassandra wished she was inside his head right now, to understand how the War God functioned. Certainly not like most men.

Becoming a high-ranked concubine after spending eight or nine years as a slave was already unheard of, but becoming someone's wife? No normal man would have thought of such a thing. There was a huge gap between the concubines and the official wife. A gap so important, most of the concubines in this Palace would have killed to hear those words. A man's official wife had an unshakable position. The Dragon Empire didn't recognize divorces, and even if one of the partners died, the other would never be able to replace him or her. While concubines could be abandoned or dismissed, an official wife would never need to worry about that. Hence, most men of power made sure to marry a woman from a strong background, with good looks and brains. Cassandra felt like she probably didn't check at least two of those boxes.

"Cassandra," he softly spoke her name, taking her out of her thoughts.

"You wouldn't be able to take another concubine," she said. "I'd never allow it."

That was one of the powers of the official wife. No concubines could be brought in by the husband without her consent. Therefore, most men would rather not pick a wife and have plenty of concubines instead. Or at the very least, make sure their spouse closed their eyes to a new woman.

Cassandra already knew she wouldn't be able to do that. She was already too attached to him, emotionally and physically. She would rather die than share him with another woman.

"It's fine," replied the Prince.

"It isn't fine. I won't be able to do much to help you. I'm not as smart as your mother, or as powerful as your sister."

Cassandra was worried. If something happened between him and his brothers, she would be powerless. She had no backing, nothing to help him. His brothers' women probably had a lot of money, influence and scholars behind them. A merchant or even a minister's daughter would have been a hundred times better than her to be his wife.

However, no matter how much she thought about it, Cassandra knew that man too well. He wouldn't change his mind. He was odd and stubborn about what he wanted and didn't want. Luckily for her, she was among the things he liked most.

She smiled and leaned in closer to him, stealing another kiss. He never refused her kisses and it wouldn't be the case for this one either. Gently brushing his fingers through her hair, he tasted her sweetness, rolling with her on the bed. His young concubine was obviously too tired tonight, her eyes kept closing and her breathing slowed.

The War God was fine with that, she definitely deserved some rest. But...

"You didn't answer me," he remarked as Cassandra was half-asleep on his chest.

She smiled.

"You do that often."

He frowned, wondering what she was talking about. But before he could even begin to figure it out, she had fallen fast asleep. He sighed, putting her small hand to his lips to kiss her pale skin, and wrapped her gently in his embrace. He then closed his eyes, too.

The next morning, Cassandra woke up with a horrible feeling. Something smelled terribly bad. She struggled to sit up. It was so early, it was barely dawn outside and her Prince was still soundly sleeping next to her.

Yet, she couldn't stay in bed. She stood up and glanced at the tray of food someone had brought in while they were asleep. She then stumbled to the washbasin. Her skin was covered in goosebumps and she kept gagging above the basin, her head spinning.

"Cassandra?"

Kairen had woken up the moment she moved, but now she seemed really unwell. He rushed to her side, worried. He had no idea what was going on until Cassandra loudly threw up.

"Cassandra, you're sick? Is it poison?"

"The... food..." she managed to stutter, pointing at the tray.

The Prince frowned before understanding that her sickness was due to her pregnancy, not any sort of poisoning. He grabbed the whole tray and threw it out of the closest open window, before running back to her.

"What can I do to help?" he asked while caressing her hair.

Cassandra shook her head. She was just trying to breathe a little deeper, and she felt too embarrassed to talk after vomiting. She had occasional random morning sickness, but this was the first in his presence and the most embarrassing one. While Kareen knew about the unpleasant consequences of pregnancy, her son was clueless.

Since his concubine couldn't formulate any request, Kairen called out for servants to assist. Dahlia and another young woman rushed in to help Cassandra.

"Lady Cassandra, would you like some water?" whispered Dahlia.

"P...please."

Unhappy, Kairen stood to the side with his arms crossed, watching the two servants take care of his concubine. He hated being unable to help, but this was a woman's matter. If Cassandra was uncomfortable with his help, he'd rather do nothing and let the servants assist her.

After a few minutes, Cassandra was able to sit down and talk. With the Prince by her side rubbing her back, she let Dahlia know the ingredients and smells that usually triggered her nausea or made it worse. The young servant nodded in acknowledgement.

"I will make sure the kitchen knows, Lady Cassandra."

As Dahlia stood up to leave, Kairen watched her and turned to Cassandra.

"You can make her your private servant if you want," he suggested.

To his surprise, Cassandra's eyes widened in mild disbelief.

"Really?"

He had thought she would straight out refuse the idea, but on the contrary, she seemed to love it. He nodded.

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes...I might even be a bit hungry, to be honest. This baby is really moody."

Kairen nodded and put a hand on the little bump. His son. That child better be good to his mother once he's born.

After a while, Dahlia reappeared with a different tray and some of the specific food Cassandra had requested. The only thing they could find, though, was a variety of nuts that grew further south, which made the Prince frown. Cassandra, however, was satisfied with what Dahlia had gathered in such a short amount of time. She cleaned herself up a bit, got changed, and decided to eat in the closest open space she could find, as she didn't want to stay in the room where she had just vomited minutes ago.

The Prince followed closely behind her, to everyone's surprise. The Imperial Servants couldn't help but stare at the War God accompanying his concubine like she was a precious treasure he needed to keep within arms reach.

As soon as they sat in the garden, Krai appeared over their heads and even bickered with its Master about who would sit closest to the concubine. Dahlia watched as the scene unfolded before her. With Cassandra chuckling between the dragon and its master, she couldn't help but feel that Cassandra might just be the luckiest concubine around.

"Can we go search around the brothels today?" suddenly asked Cassandra, turning to the Prince.

Kairen frowned.

"You're sick."

"I'm not sick, I'm pregnant. I will be fine. Dahlia can take care of my needs."

The young servant avidly nodded in agreement. Kairen glared at her, immediately causing her to look down in fear.

"No. I wouldn't be able to accompany you."

He probably had more meetings with the Emperor and his military advisors today again, but Cassandra was tired of doing nothing aside from getting lost and sipping tea with his mother. She took a deep breath and insisted again.

"Please. I'll probably be safer there than I am here."

That part was true. With her pink dress and an Imperial Servant following her, no one would dare to lift a finger towards her. In the Palace, however, she could be attacked at any time. The Prince's frown continued, he didn't like having her in a different place. It was fine when she was with his mother in the Diamond Palace, but...

“Go with Shareen,” he finally said.

Cassandra smiled widely, unable to hide her satisfaction. She could finally start looking for her younger sister! Moreover, she would definitely be safe with an Imperial Princess. She kissed his scratchy cheek swiftly.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

This simple kiss distracted him from frowning. He sighed, surrendering himself to her and kissed her back. Seeing this, Dahlia discreetly left them.

A couple of hours later, Dahlia was surprised to see that the young concubine was still accompanied by the dragon. She had heard from other servants how the beast was infatuated with her. But seeing it like this was a bit different.

Any move Cassandra made, Krai was watching like a curious puppy following its Master. The large dragon struggled to follow her with its huge body, sometimes crawling over the buildings and growling at the servants who appeared too suddenly. When Shareen arrived though, it didn't dare growl at her.

“The Red District? Really?” asked the Princess.

“I am looking for my younger sister,” explained Cassandra. “My best opportunity to find her is there.”

“I see...very well, that might be a fun outing,” said Shareen. “And it gives me an excuse to avoid Mother's nagging about my lifestyle.”

Shareen's way to have fun wasn't to her mother's taste. Hence, Karen usually resorted to a silent protest by visiting her from dawn until dusk, unless the Princess was busy elsewhere that is. Cassandra was surprised to learn Shareen was the most involved Princess in the Empire's politics. She attended most of the meetings along with her brothers and refused to be defeated by any man in the room. She was well-respected in most circles for being a smart, strong woman who didn't need a man to back her up; not even her own father. Like the other members of her family, she had a short temper, however. Bringing her sword to meetings wasn't just for decorative purposes.

As the women left the Palace, Cassandra felt like a big weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She couldn't fully relax in that place without the Prince around.

Though she had never been there personally, Cassandra had lived long enough in the Capital to know where the Red District was. She naturally headed there with Shareen and Dahlia, the black-scaled dragon following behind. It was a truly strange procession that the bystanders witnessed that day. A concubine in a pink dress, along with an Imperial Princess, only one servant with them, and...an Imperial Dragon that struggled to fit inside the busy streets. Many displays fell victim to a wing or tail in its wake, despite the merchants' desperate attempts to push it out of the way. No one wanted to hinder their path, and the trio progressed easily through the streets.

The reputation of the Imperial Family preceded them. Any glance, gesture, or sound could trigger a brutal and violent death, and no one wanted to leave any chance for that to happen. Shareen's purple outfit was like a ghost, making nearly everyone run away. Though she found it sad, Cassandra understood the people's fears and didn't comment on that. There were too many spiteful Princesses back at the Palace, she had witnessed it herself. People were bound to fear them.

As they progressed in the streets, Cassandra was surprised when she realized that Shareen knew the way perfectly.

"Have you been to the Red District before, Your Highness?"

"I already told you to just call me Shareen, didn't I? You're my brother's woman, you need to grow a backbone...and yes, I go there often."

Cassandra didn't mind her rude way of speaking. After living with Shareen for a bit at her mother's Palace, she had grown used to it. Shareen was extremely blunt and literally had no filter on any subject. She spoke that way to anyone, except maybe her own mother.

"Really?" asked Cassandra. "I mean... I didn't think members of the Imperial Family would...venture to such a place."

"Oh, some do. I like to go...shopping."

"For..."

Cassandra then understood her meaning and desperately blushed. A question popped in her head, but she chased it away, as she could never gather the courage to ask. After all, she had experienced herself how playful Shareen was.

Behind them, Dahlia was walking silently, glancing back and forth between the two women. Though she had volunteered to accompany Cassandra, she was just as shy as

the concubine about going there. She silently continued peeking at the Imperial Princess, intimidated, but she also kept an eye on the dragon following them. Like common people, Dahlia was naturally afraid of it. If she hadn't seen it being so gentle with Cassandra before, she probably would have been absolutely terrified about coming along.

“So, where do you want to start?” asked the Princess as they reached the district.

During the day, that area was known to be relatively calm. Most people here worked at night, so the brothels were barely just opening their doors to let the caretakers, servants, and slaves inside to do their chores. Cassandra glanced left and right, but she had no real clue.

“I guess we'll just have to ask around?”

“Right. We better do it now before they notice your pet and start screaming and running away.”

“Oh.”

Cassandra had almost forgotten about the dragon. Indeed, it would be a bit inconvenient to walk Krai around. She smiled and walked up to it, immediately getting all of the dragon's attention. Krai had been following very curiously to where they were going. When the young concubine turned to it, it could barely contain his excitement, crushing two stalls with the swish of its tail.

Cassandra put her hands on the warm snout, scratching it.

“Could you wait for us here, Krai?”

She wasn't sure how much the dragon understood her words, but since the mountain episode, she knew how to make it lay down and wait. She began patting its snout with both hands until it laid its whole body down. Krai closed its eyes, ready for a little nap.

“Good boy,” she said with a smile. “Don't eat people!”

Whether it had understood that last part or not, Cassandra wasn't certain. Krai, however, opened one large red eye to watch her walk away with the two other women.

Dahlia was in shock. She thought the young concubine must have the blood of a Goddess to order around a dragon like that. She had it obeying her commands like a pet! The dragon's owner didn't even need to be present! She had previously thought the dragon was pampering her because the Prince was always around, but she had it all wrong! Now, per Cassandra's request, the most dangerous beast in this Empire was taking a nice little nap in the middle of the street!

"Let's start with this one," suggested Shareen, heading to the closest building. "You know what to ask?"

Cassandra nodded, stepping ahead.

Needless to say, anyone who opened their door was completely struck by the sight of the two women. One woman wearing the Imperial Purple and the other was clearly a high-ranked concubine! A couple of the people Cassandra spoke with even wondered internally if this could be some sort of scam, seeing as the strange duo was accompanied by only one servant.

"I'm looking for my younger sister," Cassandra repeated for the eighth time that day. "She would be sixteen years old now, she was captured nine years ago. She probably resembles me."

Back when they were children, Missandra and Cassandra indeed looked a lot alike. They had the same brown hair, the same thin nose, and even the exact same emerald eyes. Even if her sister had matured, Cassandra hoped that their whiter skin would help people remember her.

"Sorry, Imperial Concubine," said the woman. "I don't remember anyone that matches your description. You might want to ask next door though, they usually purchase the girls when they're young. They're well-known for their training."

Cassandra thanked her, but she was starting to feel a bit discouraged. Someone should have been able to remember Missandra by now. Even if many girls came in and out of these establishments, not many would have been from an entirely different origin. Compared to the gold and brown tanned skins around them, Missandra should have stood out.

"So boring..." said Shareen. "We can't even see their girls at this hour."

"We didn't come here to shop, remember?"

"Speak for yourself."

“Do you buy your servants here? Instead of the usual market?” asked Cassandra.

She had noticed how Shareen surrounded herself with beautiful things and attractive people. Most of her servants were gorgeous women and handsome young men. She didn't seem to care much about their personalities though.

Once again, Cassandra repeated the same words to the old woman who ran the next brothel. However, this one wore an odd expression while Cassandra spoke.

“Oh, that's why you seemed so familiar, My Lady! You're Mie's older sister, you look just like her!”

“Mie?”

“Yes, yes, Mie! How could I forget her? That child was a little spitfire! Always running around yelling and stealing food. A little demon, that one!”

Shareen sent a doubtful look to Cassandra.

“You sure that sounds like your sis?”

“She was always more energetic than me,” whispered Cassandra before turning back to the woman. “Is she here? Could I see her?”

“Oh, no, no, Imperial Concubine. She left years ago. We sold her to another brothel, one of our top clients couldn't stand her. I think she went to...yes, yes, let me check my notebook, it should be written down somewhere.”

The old lady disappeared for a while, leaving those two standing in the entrance. Cassandra's heart was thumping loudly in her chest. Could this really be Missandra? Did she finally find a lead, after all these years?

She returned to give them an address to another brothel a few streets away. As soon as they got there though, Cassandra's heart broke. The place was closed.

“Crap...do you think they will open soon? Maybe we could just wait a bit?” she sighed.

Next to her, Shareen rolled her eyes and took out her sword.

“Seriously, act like your rank, pretty face. You're an Imperial Concubine. You don't fucking wait!”

With those last words, Shareen brutally destroyed the entrance door, sending the panels of wood flying away. She had released her full strength on them, making it even larger than it was supposed to be. Cassandra felt guilty for whoever would have to pay for the damages...but still followed the Princess inside.

A man came running quickly towards them. And while his initial intention was clearly to yell, his mouth snapped shut once he spotted the two women. His mouth curled into an odd grin.

“You...Your Highnesses, can this humble man ask wh...what has caused your anger?” he stammered awkwardly, glancing at the large opening.

“You,” said Shareen, visibly out of patience. She steadily pointed her sword at the man’s chin. “Tell us if you bought a girl that looked like this concubine, years ago. She may have gone by the name Mie.”

The man only took a quick glance at Cassandra, very eager to answer.

“Y...yes, Your Highness! I remember her, but she isn’t here! We...we sold that girl three months later, we couldn’t keep her! She had bitten the customers and hit the owner.”

“Really?” said Shareen, turning to Cassandra with an admiring look. “Damn, Cassie, it sounds like your sis took all the fiery side and didn’t leave you any, did she?”

“Where did she go next?” asked Cassandra, ignoring her.

“I...I think the Master sold her to another brothel, a few streets down, but I know that place ended up selling her too. Five weeks later, the same thing happened.”

Cassandra sighed. Missandra really didn’t make things easy for them...though she was a bit happy that her younger sister had tried to resist her fate. She just hoped she hadn’t run into more trouble by doing so.

For the next hour, the same scenarios repeated over and over again. Each time they asked a new brothel, they got similar stories. It appeared Missandra only ever stayed in any of the brothels for a few weeks to a few months. She’d end up injuring a customer or worker, and consequently would be sold again. Even Shareen was impressed.

“I hope she didn’t get treated too badly and punished for all of this,” said Cassandra as they walked their way to the next brothel.

“Oh, she probably was,” replied the Princess. “However, the brothel owners are careful not to scar or permanently injure their merchandise. She probably got cold showers or was starved. Things like that. I’m starting to get very curious though, she must be a real beauty if people kept buying her despite her reputation.”

Cassandra had the same feeling. Every brothel that Missandra had been to, no matter how short, clearly remembered her as soon as they saw Cassandra. How much longer would it take to find her? As they were about to enter yet another brothel, Shareen suddenly stopped, her eyes elsewhere with a glare.

“Shareen?”

“Wait, it’s...”

The Imperial Princess was staring in another direction, towards two women who were quietly chatting. Cassandra didn’t recognize either of them. One of them, judging by her clothes, was a prostitute. While the other woman was distinguishably younger, fourteen or fifteen years old at the most. The most intriguing thing was the green dress the second one was wearing.

To her surprise, Shareen suddenly rushed to those women who hadn’t seen her coming and grabbed the younger girl’s wrist. She screamed in fright. When Cassandra arrived at the scene, the prostitute woman had fled the scene, but the girl caught by Shareen looked petrified. The Princess, however, looked like a feline who had just caught her prey.

“I wonder what you’re doing here, Valeria.”

Cassandra wondered if she was an Imperial Servant for Shareen, but that didn’t seem to be right. The girl was shivering from head to toe, holding on to a little glass potion in her hand. She was avoiding Shareen’s eyes, completely terrified.

“Who is this?” asked Cassandra, feeling lost.

“This? This is one of my younger siblings, Valeria, Twenty-Fifth Imperial Princess. Care to explain what the hell you’re doing in this place wearing this outfit, little sister?”

Like a rabbit caught in a trap, the young Valeria didn’t dare move a muscle. It was the first time Cassandra witnessed a member of the Imperial Family looking this scared. Was it because of Shareen? She couldn’t be one of Kareen’s children, so who was her concubine mother? A girl her age and her rank definitely had no reason to be there,

especially alone and in a servant's outfit. It looked like she had snuck out of the Palace in disguise.

"Valeria, talk," insisted Shareen.

However, the young woman stayed completely mute and petrified by fear. Annoyed, Shareen ripped the little bottle out of her hands and passed it to Cassandra.

"Aren't you good with plants and potions? What is that?"

The girl was on the verge of tears.

"Let me go," she begged, trying to pull away from Shareen's tight grip.

Cassandra reluctantly opened the bottle. She didn't like doing this, but if Shareen was asking she had no choice. A quick little sniff made her grimace, nausea jolted to her stomach causing her to almost drop it. Dahlia immediately took it from her. Just like Cassandra, she sniffed it and then applied a bit to her pinky to get a little taste.

"Dahlia don't! It could be poisoned," said Cassandra, worried.

"It is fine, My Lady. I have been trained to identify poisons. This is no such thing. I can taste green orchid, pudding grass, nutmeg, sea squill, twin-leaved gamophilia..."

The more she listed, the paler Cassandra became, understanding what the vial contained. Shareen noticed.

"Cassandra, what is it?"

The young concubine exchanged a look with the servant, who nodded, confirming her thoughts.

"It's an abortifacient. A potion used to...induce a miscarriage."

Instinctively, Cassandra put a hand on her belly and lost all compassion for the young Princess, who was clearly terrified. Her dark eyes went from Cassandra's tummy to Shareen, growing wider and wider.

"No, no, no! Sister Shareen, I swear this wasn't meant for the concubine! I swear! I would never dare to..."

"To try to harm my brother's offspring? Is that it, Valeria?" said Shareen with a menacing tone, raising her wrist higher.

The young girl cried out in pain. Shareen was taller than her, the difference in strength was showcased by the calm and effortless way she hung her younger sister by her wrist.

“Spill it, Valeria. Who is that meant for, you little swine?”

The young Princess obviously couldn't bring herself to say it. Her expression was tortured between pain and frustration, but Shareen was not going to let go until she heard what she wanted.

“I swear...I swear it wasn't for her,” she cried repeatedly.

“For who, then? Talk, we don't have all day!”

“Shareen,” whispered Cassandra, feeling a bit uncomfortable with the situation.
“Maybe we should...”

“No, she will say it, now. Even if she doesn't know who it was destined for, she has to know who asked her for it. Dressing up as a servant, leaving without an escort, and trying to evade me, too. You know how short my patience is Valeria, and I don't think Father would mind much if I lost my temper with you.”

The threat was ice cold. Even Cassandra felt a chill. Was Valeria the daughter of a lower concubine of the Emperor? She probably didn't have any of the brothers' backing, from Shareen's words.

However, she was only fifteen and defenseless like this. Cassandra sighed. She truly believed this potion wasn't made for her. Valeria looked like she would have been much more terrified if Shareen had seen through her right away.

“Is it for one of the concubines?” asked Cassandra. “One of the Princes' or perhaps one of His Highness' women?”

Valeria turned her eyes to her, looking a bit surprised by the sudden questioning, but seeing her lack of response, Cassandra was pretty sure neither of those were right. Then there was only one option remaining.

“Is it for one of the Princesses?”

This time, Valeria went from red to white in a matter of seconds. Shareen saw it too, and smirked.

“So that’s what it is. One of our dearest sisters ordered you to get this. Now I’m wondering which one of those bitches was dumb enough to get pregnant.”

To Cassandra’s surprise, she let go of Valeria right after those words. The young Princess didn’t wait and ran away in a hurry. Cassandra turned to Shareen, confused.

“Is that it? Aren’t you going to ask her which one?”

“There are only a few who could get that child so scared. If it was the daughter of a low-ranked concubine, Valeria would have spilled the beans as soon as I caught her. She is an only child and her mother is of no importance now. Whichever Princess ordered her to get this potion is at least as scary as I am, and there aren’t many that can claim that title.”

Cassandra finally understood. Though they were all seemingly sisters, not all Princesses had the same status or power. Shareen, for example, was backed up by a favored mother and brother. Phetra also had a rather comfortable position thanks to her Imperial Brother, Vrehan. However, not all Princesses had the same luck. Unless they had a brother or a mother favored by the Emperor, they were probably just pawns for the others to use. Valeria was probably among the unlucky ones, fighting for her own survival just like many others.

Who could be pulling her strings then? Cassandra had an idea, but she wasn’t sure.

“Which Princess would want an abortion potion?” she wondered out loud.

“Don’t know. But we are not supposed to engage in sexual relations until our father marries us off.”

Cassandra turned to Shareen, surprised. She knew it was a rather basic rule for daughters in the Dragon Empire, but somehow, this brought out a completely different side of Shareen she had never thought about.

“Does that mean you are...?”

“Married? Me?” asked Shareen with a snarl. “Oh, hell no.”

“But...”

Cassandra still vividly remembered some scenes the Princess was involved in that she would rather forget. She even blushed just thinking about it. Shareen smirked.

“Oh Cassandra, I may be a virgin, but it doesn’t mean I can’t play, right?”

This sentence would stay for a long time in the young concubine's mind before she put together what it meant, rearranging her whole outlook on Shareen.

She shook her head trying to forget about it for now and turned to Dahlia, pointing at the little potion still in the servant's hands.

“Do you think she only came here for this?”

“I would believe so...no Princess would want to be seen here buying an abortion potion. Father would be furious!”

Cassandra nodded, taking the potion from her. She considered holding on to this until they found the culprit. Maybe she could even find a clue.

“All right,” said Shareen. “I've had enough, let's go grab your feisty sister before I really lose my patience.”

The three women agreed to go check the next brothel, but once again, Cassandra was left disheartened. Missandra had come and gone from this place as well. This time, however, things appeared to be a bit different, as the young eunuch explained.

“Mie tricked some local thugs into losing a lot of money, and they didn't appreciate that. They came often to harass this brothel, so the owner decided to kick her out. She didn't realize until after that Mie had stolen her money too. I don't know where she is now though, this came to light about eight or nine months ago. She could be anywhere, but I'd be willing to bet she didn't stay in the Red District. Too many people were unhappy with her, and I know there's a group of thugs still actively looking for her. To be honest with you, I wouldn't even be surprised if she left the Capital, Your Highness.”

Cassandra repressed the urge to cry. How could her younger sister get into so much trouble? She should only be sixteen by now! Did Missandra grow to be such a mischievous girl from her upbringing in the Red District? The worst part for Cassandra was to think that after all this time, the two women had been in the same city. Though the Capital was extremely vast, they could have crossed paths if Cassandra had ventured closer to this area, or if Missandra had been near one of her old master's properties.

“Well,” said Shareen. “I guess that's all for today. At least we know this troublemaker sister of yours was still alive and well a few months ago. She could be literally anywhere now, though.”

“I can still ask around...there are a few places Missandra could have tried to go.”

Cassandra was already thinking about where to search for her next. After everything she had discovered today, she couldn't give up. She felt closer to Missandra than she had been in years.

“Tomorrow, pretty face,” said the Princess with a frown. “The sun is close to setting, and my brother will make a fuss if I don't bring you back before night falls. Especially considering where we spent our day.”

Cassandra blushed. Indeed, a lot more establishments were open now, as the brothels and their tenants were preparing to work. More customers were filling the streets too, though they kept a careful distance from the three women. They probably wondered what this odd trio was doing here.

“Come on, let's go.”

As they started walking back, Cassandra couldn't help but glance sideways, just in case she might spot Missandra. It was a bit desperate, but she just couldn't stop scanning the people around them. Even though Shareen noticed her slower pace, she didn't bother mentioning it, and continued to walk her back to the entrance.

“You!”

An angry voice came from behind them, but for the first few seconds, neither Shareen or Cassandra realized his shouts were directed at them. When they noticed the people eyeing them however, they turned around.

Charging their way was a large man with a shaved head, and too many tattoos on his face to actually distinguish his traits from other men. He was quite horrendous to look at, but Cassandra had a good guess who the man was anyway. In the Capital, criminals were marked, their wrongdoings tattooed in visible places for others to see. Most people would want to avoid those markings, so they weren't outcast by society. However, local thugs, like this man, displayed them proudly, as if it was proof of their strength. And he surely had a lot!

“You little bitch! Do you think you can hide from us? And use this kind of disguise, too? You'll see!”

Shareen and Cassandra exchanged looks, completely unsure about what was going on. It was Dahlia who understood first and stepped in between the man and the young concubine.

“I think you are mistaken, Sir! My Lady is not the one you seek!”

“Are you kidding me? This bitch is the one I’ve been looking for! You’d better give me my money back or you’ll take a good beating for stealing from me, you bitch!”

Cassandra was speechless. Was that man mistaking her for her sister? Were they really so alike that someone would actually confuse them? A group of men were now gathering behind him, only a few had less tattoos than the first, but all had quite the same horrible faces.

Shareen sighed, swinging her swords hesitantly.

“Cassie, do you mind if I play a bit? I need the exercise and I have some frustration to release.”

While Cassandra had a generous soul, she really didn’t care much for criminals. That man’s crimes were visible all over his skin. She was well aware that this sort of person would demonstrate horrible behaviors towards women like her. Keeping that in mind, she nodded and crossed her arms.

“Alright gentlemen, let’s play,” declared Shareen enthusiastically.

Cassandra turned around and saw they were only a few steps away from the entrance.

Even while the Princess was happily dueling with all the men present, Cassandra knew she wouldn’t be able to handle them all, especially since they were attempting to corner the trio. Dahlia had taken out a little dagger, but it wouldn’t do much against the sabers the criminals had.

The young concubine took two fingers to her mouth and whistled. After a few seconds, a large figure shadowed them. The thugs looked up, their faces turning white as a sheet.

“Cassandra! Why are you spoiling my fun?”

“I am tired. And besides, this is not a playground. I want to go back, My Lord will be expecting me.”

Krai landed next to her, growling immediately like a big cat would purr. A paw was squishing a man on the ground with a gruesome sound and a long scream, but the dragon didn’t seem to hear it. Instead, it was more curious about the men running around in utter fear. Krai gobbled one up, as if trying some new treat out of sheer

curiosity. Meanwhile, Cassandra was climbing on its back, leaving Shareen to her little game. Another thug tried to throw his saber at Cassandra, but the dragon sent it flying away with a quick flap of its wing. Unfortunately for the man, his weapon came right back to him, stabbing through him, painfully.

“Fine, you party-wrecker, just go!” Shareen yelled. “But take that damn lizard with you before he eats them all!”